



PARLIAMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

HON THOMAS McNEIL, MLC

Condolence Motion



Legislative Council

Wednesday, 14 October 2020

Reprinted from Hansard

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Condolence Motion

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the House) [1.01 pm] — without notice: I move —

That this house expresses its deep regret at the death of Hon Thomas McNeil, a former member of the Legislative Council for the Upper West Province, and places on record its appreciation for his long public service and tenders its profound sympathy to members of his family in their bereavement.

I want to start by acknowledging the many family, friends and colleagues of the honourable member who are with us today in the public gallery.

Hon Thomas McNeil was born on 9 June 1929 in Glasgow, Scotland. He was the son of Thomas and Elizabeth and was educated at Mont Albert State School, Camberwell High School and Hampton High School in Victoria. Thomas had an unusual arrival in Australia. During the height of the air raids on Britain during the Second World War, he and his sister, along with several hundred children, were evacuated to Australia on the ship *Batory*. The *Batory* first docked in Perth—perhaps that was a sign for his future—but Melbourne was its destination. For a couple of years, Thomas and his sister were fostered out amongst other families before they moved in with a family in Hampton. Eventually, his parents immigrated to Australia.

It was during this early period in his life that he would come to play and excel at Australian Rules football. An extract from “Sporting Traditions: the journal of the Australian Society for Sports History” notes that McNeil learnt to play Aussie Rules at Hampton High School and remembers being fascinated by the oddly shaped ball. In 1951–52, he would go on to play in the Victorian Football League for St Kilda Football Club—we cannot blame people for their choice of football team!—and was paid £5, which is around \$200 in today’s money. During the same period, he also coached football and successfully formed an early version of what is now known as the AFL Players’ Association. I want to talk a bit about that.

On a trip back to Scotland in 1955, Thomas had learnt of the round ball players union in Scotland and England and decided that he would attempt to start a players union in Australia. He declared this intention to the immigration officials on the ship back to Australia and on arrival in Melbourne he was greeted by a number of journalists. He held the position of secretary of his newly formed Australian Football Players’ Union until the early 1970s when, unfortunately, it failed due to low membership. But his dream would eventually be realised and, as we know now, the AFL Players’ Association is a strong players union in Australia.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Thomas moved around to several locations in Australia and held a number of jobs, most notably as a tyre salesman. He lived in country Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland before settling in Western Australia. He opened a tyre business in Geraldton before entering the Parliament of Western Australia in 1977 as a Country Party member. History records that he had a short stint as an Independent before joining the National Party in 1979. His time as a member of this place saw him serve on several committees, including the Standing Committee on Government Agencies, the Joint House Committee, the Select Committee on Burswood Management Ltd, the Select Committee on Charitable Collections and, true to his other passion in life, the Select Committee on Sport and Recreation. During his time in this place, he introduced a private member’s bill to stop players in country leagues from transferring to the east. It was a great idea but it did not succeed. He also held a number of official positions within his party. He was National Party Whip, secretary of the National Party and spokesperson for the National Party on sport, recreation and youth affairs.

I was struck by two points that Thomas made in his valedictory speech. First, he said —

I am one of the more fortunate—or unfortunate, as the case may be—members who got into this place probably by accident ... I was minding my own business and doing quite well when I was approached to stand ... I thank the Labor Party for all those sweet preferential votes which got me over the line ...

The second point was an interesting reflection. He said —

My attitude in this place has been never to speak at any great length. I consider it to be one of the downfalls of this House that we get permission to go on for unlimited periods.

A man after my own heart! On leaving the Parliament, Thomas continued to serve Western Australia by going on to chair the Racecourse Development Trust of Western Australia, which allocated money back into the industry.

On behalf of the government and the Parliamentary Labor Party, I express my sincere condolences to the McNeil family for their loss.

HON JACQUI BOYDELL (Mining and Pastoral) [1.07 pm]: I rise this afternoon to contribute to the condolence motion for Hon Thomas McNeil, a former member of the Legislative Council for the Upper West Province from 22 May 1977 until 21 May 1989.

I take this opportunity to welcome and extend our sincere sympathy to Tom's family, who are with us. Unfortunately, they are not in the chamber due to our COVID restrictions on the floor of the house, but they are in the public gallery. We thank you for being here. I also welcome those members of his family who reside in the eastern states and are watching our contribution today. I note that due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, unfortunately, we have had to wait a long time to move this condolence motion. Tom actually passed in March of this year, at the beginning of this terrible global event, and it is only now, six months later, with those restrictions lifting that we are able to have Tom's family with us to acknowledge his incredible life and long parliamentary career.

I want to go into a bit of Hon Thomas McNeil's history and background as supplied by his wife, Helen, and former Deputy Premier Hendy Cowan. In preparing for this motion today, he very kindly contributed some of his recollections of having served with Hon Tom McNeil in this place.

As reflected by the Leader of the House, Tom McNeil was born in Glasgow, Scotland, on 9 June 1929. He and his sister were evacuated to Australia during World War II and they arrived in Melbourne in 1940, when he was just 11 years old. Here they stayed with host families until their parents joined them in 1947. It was an incredible start to a long and fruitful life. I am sure that he and his sister reflected on what a disruption that was to the McNeil family at that time many times during their childhood and as they became adults and had families of their own. It is interesting to compare Tom's early life and that upheaval with our current situation in which some families are overseas and have been separated for long periods, but certainly not for that length of time. It is my heartfelt hope that no-one in our current situation faces a separation of the same magnitude that the McNeil family faced at that time.

Before his career as a member of Parliament, he had a career playing Australian Rules football, as the Leader of the House said, and he was quite renowned for that career. Having originally started playing soccer during his childhood, he was introduced to Australian Rules by a mate in his early schooling life in Australia. He obviously showed some promise and made his debut for St Kilda in 1951 at the age of 22. After a short playing career, by today's standards at any rate, he moved on to coaching and administrator roles for many years across various metropolitan and country leagues. One of Tom's early aspirations, which was sparked on a trip to Scotland, was to form a collective body to represent players' interests. Tom was very passionate about this issue. He saw that many times players were taken advantage of by the system that was in place. It was perhaps this project that sparked a theme that was present throughout his life, and that was championing the underdog. He faced both enthusiasm for and opposition to this idea, as members can imagine, as it was a very new concept at the time. Collaborating with a few others who shared his vision, he created a constitution and on 13 May 1955, the constitution was ratified and a players union was formed. Union membership grew to almost 20 per cent of players in the following year, although it faced strong opposition from the Australian Rules football league at the time. At the end of that year, registration of the union was refused by the Australian Rules football league on technical grounds and Tom chose not to appeal the decision, citing a lack of support amongst players. It was, however, a cause that remained close to his heart, and improving conditions for professional football players was something that Tom strove for and championed whenever the opportunity arose.

I will now reflect on a couple of specific points about different aspects of Tom's life that came up while talking to his wife, Helen, in preparing for today. Tom was not a career politician. When he was approached by the then Country Party to run for the seat of Upper West Province, he was not necessarily aspiring to lead the life of a member of Parliament. However, he chose to stand and subsequently won the seat, and so began his life as a member of Parliament, which was over a long period. He had a strong understanding of regional life and was a good representative for his country constituents. He was here because he wanted to enact change and make life better for regional people. Suffice to say, in researching this contribution today, many different aspects of his life in this place have been remembered but can be summed up by saying that he was a passionate member of Parliament who liked a level of independence and disliked some of the bureaucratic and public aspects that a member of Parliament is exposed to, and I think we can all understand that.

Helen McNeil, his wife, who is with us today, remembers some of the proudest moments of his parliamentary career and thankfully is happy for me to share some of those with members. I will paraphrase some of those stories, so, hopefully, Helen, I can cover the important parts.

The first aspect I will cover is a win that Tom had for the Lancelin crayfishermen. This is an incredible story. Tom was very proud of his success in helping crayfishermen in Lancelin after a large number of their pots were destroyed. The United States Navy was undertaking some practice exercises off the coast of Lancelin and due to a miscommunication around measuring depth in fathoms rather than metres, the US Navy mistakenly fired on, and

subsequently destroyed, a large number of craypots off the coast. That is quite an extreme mistake by the US Navy. Obviously, the fishermen were not happy about that, so they sought financial compensation to allow them to replace those damaged pots. The fishermen approached all levels of government and were firmly told that there was nothing that anybody could do. They were going to have to wear the cost of the US Navy's mistake themselves. When Tom heard of this, he thought that was mighty unfair and decided that he was not going to take no for an answer, so he wrote to the American ambassador and, as a result of his intervention, the fishermen were finally recompensed. That was a fantastic result for those fishermen and is evidence of Tom's willingness to fight for what he believed in until he got the result that he felt was right and just—as every member of Parliament should do.

Another issue that Tom was involved in was television coverage of football in regional areas. I can attest to this: having grown up in Carnarvon, there was no football on TV when I was a child. I cannot cover everything that Tom was proud of, but sport and his connection to it was one of them, so it would not be a condolence motion without remembering that aspect of his life. Members who have lived in the regions will understand this, but those who have not may not. Around 40 years ago, the only way to be connected to Australian Rules football was to listen to it on the radio. It was absolutely nothing like it is these days, as we know. Tom felt that this situation should be rectified, so, once again, he went into action. Advocacy started, conversations were had with the right people, letters were written and a petition was created. Tom and Helen travelled to New South Wales at their own cost to personally deliver the petition and at last the change was made and people in country areas were able to watch football on TV. Generations forever will be thankful for that, Helen and Tom, because where would we be without our AFL football?

The other thing that can be reflected on about Tom's time in Parliament is that many people, even those outside the National Party, have reflected that he was probably one of the most honest people in Parliament. The last of Helen's recollections during our conversations about Tom's proudest moments in Parliament that I will mention today is about him being recognised as an honest person and representing his constituents in this place. In fact, in a radio interview, a former Premier was asked who he thought was the most honest member of Parliament of the day and his answer was Tom McNeil. That is a pretty high accolade and one that was well deserved.

Hon Hendy Cowan is the other person I contacted ahead of this contribution today to gather some more memories of Hon Tom McNeil, and I would now like to read some of Hendy's recollections of that time. He writes —

The late Tom McNeil ran a delicatessen in Geraldton with family members when he was approached by the then Country Party President Jim Fletcher, to nominate for a seat in the Legislative Council. He was identified by local Party stalwarts as the only man capable of wresting the seat back for the Country Party.

Tom was a well-known identity in the Geraldton area. When he transferred to Geraldton from Bunbury he brought not only his family, but a reputation as a quality country footballer. In a region that takes its football very seriously, Tom's prowess as a footballer guaranteed he would be a popular newcomer to the city. He represented the Great Northern Football League at several country championship carnivals and I am advised he played very well. This is not surprising as in his youth Tom played a number of games in the VFL for the St. Kilda Football Club.

Tom's sporting attributes were well known in the mid-west region and when combined with the fact that many Geraldton residents were delicatessen customers, it gave him a very good base around which to build a campaign through the whole of the regional province and to win a seat in the Parliament.

After a successful campaign Tom finally arrived at Parliament House. For a person who had worked all his life in "hands-on" projects he found it difficult to adjust to the more ordered and bureaucratic style of the Parliament or the Party. Notwithstanding his difficulty with the system, Tom was able to adjust and made a significant contribution in the Parliament and to the Party.

Two characteristics stood out. Firstly, if Tom gave you his word on any matter, then he followed through to the letter. Secondly, before giving a commitment Tom maintained a set of personal principles that had to be met and he invariably thought about the people he represented. It was never a matter of "what is in it for me?" It was more "how will this impact upon the people I represent". Whichever way matters were couched, if it did not comply with Tom's own personal beliefs, then we were wasting our time trying to convince him.

Tom was very committed to his children. While he would never elaborate, Tom often claimed that he migrated from Victoria, firstly to Queensland and finally Western Australia in order to keep his family intact. You only had to visit the delicatessen to witness his devotion to family. Most of the children worked there when time permitted and anybody could see the special relationship that existed between the father and his children.

My fondest memories of Tom are not associated with the work we did as members of Parliament. It is built more around those times we had relaxing after a hard day in the House. Tom was always good fun to be with. When you could get him started he had a lot of good stories to tell and he kept everybody entertained for long periods of time."

I actually met Hon Tom McNeil in 2009 when I first came to work in the Parliament. For the first couple of years that I worked here, he was a former member who utilised the house often, still working on issues and still engaged and energetic. He would certainly give me advice in the times I met him in the corridor, or when he was downstairs I would go and say hello. He was always a lovely, exceptionally polite man, and he will always be remembered by the Nationals WA. In the National party room, our hallowed ground, his legacy will live on forever on our honour board. We thank him for his time as a member of this house and as a member of the National Party.

Tom McNeil embodied the grassroots values of what was then the Country Party and is now the National Party. We pride ourselves on being here to truly represent our regional constituents, and that is what Tom did. We pride ourselves on having high moral standards. We pride ourselves on advocating to make life better for regional communities and we pride ourselves on standing up for what we believe is right, even if it means we lose some skin in the process. There is no doubt that Hon Tom McNeil did that in his time in Parliament and in his time representing his community throughout the rest of his life. I am proud to stand here today and celebrate one of our members who exhibited every single one of those values.

May he rest in peace. We thank his family for being here.

Members: Hear, hear!

HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [1.24 pm]: I stand on behalf of the Liberal Party to support this motion. In doing so, I recognise members of Tom's family and some of his friends in the chamber.

Tom McNeil was a successful small business man and a stalwart of country football who represented a most competitive Legislative Council province for 12 years. He was born in Glasgow in Scotland into a small business family and, like many other British children, was evacuated overseas in 1940, arriving in Melbourne. After leaving Hampton High School, Tom McNeil became a salesman and commenced a notable career in football, playing for Hampton juniors and a total of eight games for St Kilda in the 1951–52 Victorian Football League season. He coached successful teams in metropolitan and country Victoria and in southern New South Wales. Concern that the welfare of players was being neglected led him to attempt to create a union for VFL and Victorian Football Association players in 1955.

Working for Beaurepaires as a tyre salesman led him to move to Queensland, where he played in two premierships teams for Sandgate in Brisbane. After working as a supervisor for the Olympic Tyre and Rubber Company in Townsville, Tom McNeil moved to Bunbury in 1969 as a sales representative with Beaurepaires. He played and coached at South Bunbury Football Club. He moved to Geraldton as the branch manager for Dunlop. In 1974, he worked as an insurance broker, before going on to open his own tyre business. He coached the Geraldton country football team, was the secretary of the Great Northern Football League and founded the WA Players' Association.

Tom McNeil had not been involved in politics when he was approached by the National Country Party to contest the Upper West Province of the Legislative Council at the 1977 state election. Comprising the Labor-held seat of Geraldton, the Liberal seat of Greenough and the National Country Party seat of Moore, it had been won by the Liberal Party at both the 1971 and 1974 state elections. The Liberal Party had been favoured to retain the seat being vacated by Hon Jack Heitman, MLC. In a classic three-cornered contest, Tom McNeil polled 6 142 votes, which was 27.1 per cent—crucially, 51 votes ahead of the Labor candidate. The distribution of Australian Labor Party preferences gave him a majority of 289 votes, or 50.6 per cent. It was the only seat gained by the National Country Party at the 1977 election.

Making his first speech in August 1977, Tom McNeil stressed the need for government assistance for community sport, which was over-reliant on player contributions and affiliation fees. He highlighted the unfairness of the country football zoning that had been in place since 1971, whereby country players could go to only one Western Australian National Football League club, with only \$300 paid to their local club. Moreover, the players needed permission from their WANFL club to transfer to the VFL. Later, he was to move an unsuccessful private member's bill to enable country footballers to be able to transfer interstate. In his valedictory speech, he noted with satisfaction that this freedom had been obtained so that players were better treated. He also acknowledged that he had been elected on a "sports vote". As MLC for Upper West Province, Tom was noted for presenting oval-shaped honour boards to all local premierships clubs. In 1988, he chaired the Midwest Games Management Committee, which involved 3 000 athletes from 19 shires competing in 34 sports.

In 1979, when the NCP split, Tom McNeil joined the National Party, led by Hendy Cowan, as its only Legislative Council member, until 1984. At the conclusion of his six-year term in 1983, he was opposed by both Liberal Party and National Country Party candidates, who were exchanging preferences. He polled strongly in Geraldton and gained 11 061 votes overall, or 46.3 per cent. After the distribution of NCP preferences, he retained his seat by 715 votes, or 51.5 per cent—his second hard-fought success.

Tom McNeil chose to leave Parliament prior to the 1989 election when proportional representation absorbed the Upper West Province into the far larger Agricultural Region, which was successfully contested by two fellow National MLCs. In his valedictory speech, he expressed regret that the personalised representation of the former province system would be lost. He said —

Perhaps my approach to politics has been different from that of a lot of people. I got in without any branch structures and I have not put in any while I have been here. It is extremely difficult to have to get over two elections where one must convince the delegates representing areas covered by other members of Parliament within one's own structure, and one has not got any delegates. When proportional representation comes in the Tom McNeils have to take a walk. Maybe that will work out for the better, but one of the downfalls will be the loss of the personal touch.

After leaving Parliament in 1989, Tom served as chairman of the Racecourse Development Trust, the Northern Demersal Scalefish Managed Fishery in Broome and WA Demersal Net and Hook Fishing.

We extend our sympathies to Mrs Helen McNeil; his sons, Ross and Tommy; his daughters, Lisa, Karen and Andrea; his stepson, Wayne; and his 12 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [1.29 pm]: I would very much like to join in offering my condolences to Tom's family and to reflect briefly on some matters at a personal level, which I hope will give members a richer understanding of this quite colourful character and help me to extend my condolences to his family, because I am not acquainted with Tom's family, but I was acquainted with him. We have heard about a very illustrious fellow who was prominent in supporting a range of endeavours throughout a very productive and long life. Of course, we are here today because he served for 12 years as a member of this chamber, making a strong contribution not only within these walls, but also on behalf of his constituency. That is something that needs to be celebrated on this occasion, as well as remembered, and I would like to do so with some affection.

From my point of view, Tom McNeil was perhaps one of the old school. In the lead-up to the 1989 election, the method of election to this place changed very dramatically from dual-member provinces with the members elected alternately to the current arrangement of multi-member electorates. The Leader of the Opposition referred to some of the circumstances surrounding that. I recall being a keen, enthusiastic, aspiring political participant in the 1980s and having a close association with the then President, Hon Clive Griffiths. Some years later, I succeeded Clive in his seat of South Metropolitan Region. I never had the privilege to serve with Tom McNeil, but I tell you what, I knew him, and a lot of people of my era around this place knew him as well, because he would always greet us warmly, almost as old friends. He had a very cheery disposition. We would see him around the place and he was always offering encouragement no matter the political circumstances of the day.

In the 1980s, during my political apprenticeship, leading up to the changes in the form of election, it became clear to me that there was a new party that I had not heard of before. I was keen to find out about it. I had been brought up hearing about the Country Party and the National Party. Like me, Clive was not a country member. As a metropolitan member, over the years I have had great associations with all my National Party associates—I love them all to bits—but Clive introduced me to this new group that was known, I am sure, with great affection as the “bloody Nats”. At that time, there was a proposal to go to multi-member elections, which has been alluded to already, but of course Tom McNeil was a casualty of that process. It amazed the Liberal members of this chamber in the day when contemplating that the Nats, which had four members under the old system, were only guaranteed getting about three members tops under the new system, and Clive was asking why the party would give away 25 per cent of its representation. That debate was held back in the day. I will refer to *Hansard*. It seems as though I am going to almost a sacred text; indeed, perhaps in some ways I am! On page 6404 of the *Hansard* of Thursday, 15 December 1988, Hon Tom McNeil referred to that debate. Hon Peter Collier talked about his valedictory speech, but I want to recite some other contributions today before we round out this motion, Madam President. I never witnessed this, because it was prior to all of our days in this place, but coming through in these words is the same man who greeted me warmly—I was a new member and he was a former member—and wished me so well and gave me such encouragement as I embarked on my career. I particularly want to note a couple of very human passages. On page 6404, he said —

I have to acknowledge the part played by my family. My wife is one of the people in the world who did not want me to go into politics, and cannot wait for me to get out. I have six children, and only one still at school. My position here has affected my home life, if only for the enormous amount of travelling I have had to do. In that respect it will be quite a relief to get out of Parliament.

For some of us, that is an encouraging note! In relation to the electoral matter, he said —

Mr President, my sentence is up in this place. I do not agree with Hon Des Dans in that at this juncture we cannot say who will be returned. I think we have a good idea of who will be returned because of the positions they will occupy on the ballot paper. I have always liked the situation where one was running for

a seat, competing against one, two or three people, and had the chance to go out and do battle on one's own mettle. That will be lost here because, while it may be retained in the Assembly, we will just become a party number, and the people who decide who is to be at the top of the ticket will be the people who decide who is elected.

That was a great issue of that day. He closed in this manner —

I close by saying thank you to all in this House whom I look upon as friends. If anyone wants to have a drink with me at any time, after they have bought me one I will be happy to reciprocate.

What a guy! My condolences to the family and thank you, Tom, for the great memories and the great service that you have provided to everyone else that remains.

THE PRESIDENT (Hon Kate Doust) [1.37 pm]: I am going to add a few words to this motion and offer my condolences to the family of Hon Thomas McNeil. These occasions are very important for us in this house to celebrate the lives of former members, and today I think we acknowledge that Hon Thomas McNeil had a very active, full and satisfying life prior to his entry to Parliament, during and, indeed, from what we have heard, after he left this place. We want to acknowledge the contribution he made to his constituents in his electorate over that period and certainly to his community after his time in this place, and his contribution in this chamber, which, from what we have heard today, was active and significant. He obviously pushed as many envelopes as he could to get the outcome he needed. I offer my condolences. We thank you very much. We are very pleased to have the former member's family and friends in the gallery, given we have been through a very difficult period with the COVID-19 pandemic. We are pleased that we have the opportunity to acknowledge this member's contribution in this place.

I ask members to rise and support this motion by observing a minute's silence in memory of the late Hon Tom McNeil, our esteemed former member of this Council.

Question passed; members and officers standing as a mark of respect.

The PRESIDENT: I advise that in accordance with our custom and practice, a copy of the *Hansard* of this condolence motion will be forwarded to Hon Tom McNeil's family in due course.