



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONDOLENCES

Private Gregory Sher

SPEECH

Tuesday, 3 February 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Costello, Peter, MP

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Mr COSTELLO (Higgins) (2.16 pm)—On indulgence, I wish to contribute to the condolence motion for Peter Howson. Before I do, I would like to pay tribute to the Sher family.

The Sher family came to Australia from South Africa. They are well known and well respected in Melbourne, in my electorate of Higgins. It is hard to think of any greater sacrifice a family could make than to give a son who has died for his country. I want to pay tribute to them for the great Australians they are and to his brothers and his partner in the deep loss that they have suffered.

I first meet Peter Howson in the early 1980s when the legal firm I was then working for asked me to proofread for defamation the longest set of diaries I have ever seen in my life. They were about this thick. They had been written by Peter Howson. As I read these diaries I became fascinated by the story of a young man of Anglo-Australian heritage, with an English father and an Australian mother, who had grown up in the UK, gone to the Stowe School, gone to Cambridge, joined the Royal Navy, joined the Fleet Air Arm, been shot down, was mentioned in dispatches and who after the war had come out to Australia to rescue the family firm—his mother's firm—which was Foy & Gibson. He was fond of telling the story that he briefed counsel to represent him in that case, counsel by the name of Robert Menzies KC. The case was successful and the family fortunes were reignited. But it was a bad time for department stores and, although he worked for the family business, Peter began to gain an interest in politics.

In 1949 when the size of this House was dramatically increased, the seat of Fawkner held by Harold Holt was divided and a new seat established called Higgins. Harold moved to Higgins, which was the safer part of the electorate. Peter Howson was not the candidate for the seat of Fawkner in 1949 but he was in 1951 and he was in 1954. He lost on both occasions. He was only elected in 1955 after the great Labor split. The then member for Fawkner—I think his name was Bill Bourke—went with the DLP and as a consequence the Liberal Party won the seat of Fawkner in 1955. Peter Howson eventually, under Harold Holt, became a minister, and the most controversial part of his career of course was the VIP flights affair. Peter was the Minister for Air. There was a great deal of parliamentary interest

as to who had been flying on VIP jets. Harold Holt, as it turned out, had told the press and the parliament that no manifests existed. Peter, as the Minister for Air, backed his Prime Minister. Some time later the then Liberal leader in the Senate, John Gorton, actually tabled the documents which were thought not to exist, causing a great deal of embarrassment for the Prime Minister and, indeed, the Minister for Air, Peter Howson. It became apparent to me as I was reading the diaries that Peter Howson was no admirer of John Gorton, and those were the parts in the diaries that had to be most heavily excised before they were published.

I met Peter at that time and I can say that he became a friend of mine for at least the last 25 years. I had never come across a more learned and charming man in politics than Peter Howson. Of course, when John Gorton became Prime Minister, Peter's ministerial career came to an end, and he suffered the double blow that the seat of Fawkner itself was abolished. He subsequently ran for and became the first member for the seat of Casey in 1969. He was swept out in the Whitlam election of 1972. He was restored to the ministry for a short period when his old nemesis, John Gorton, lost the prime ministership and Sir William McMahon became Prime Minister, and he held the portfolio of environment, Aborigines and the arts. He was not just the first environment minister but the first minister specifically designated to look after Aboriginal affairs. Of course, there had been ministers for Northern Australia before that, who had principally been responsible for Aboriginal affairs, but Peter was responsible for Aboriginal affairs generally.

After his defeat in 1972, Peter served the community on the Eye and Ear Hospital and in the local Anglican church. I am pleased to say that, together with his wife, Kitty, he became a great friend and supporter of mine in the Higgins electorate. He was also very active in the Bennelong Society, working until the end to advance Aboriginal welfare. He was not a supporter of Aboriginal separatism. In fact, the Bennelong Society was quite deliberately formed for the purpose of encouraging full Aboriginal participation in mainstream economic life. It was Peter's great belief that the advancement of Aboriginal people would come from full participation in Australia's mainstream economic life and not from separatism. There will be

people who will disagree with that, but that was his commitment and one which he pursued to the very end.

Peter, in many respects, represented another generation of the Liberal Party, that great generation of the 49ers—although he was not quite a 49er—who came into that parliament in the postwar period and were part of that long period of Liberal government from Menzies down to McMahon. He was immensely proud of the Liberal Party. He would sit in the front row of the State Council of the Liberal Party at every meeting, where he was a life member. Many of us would take opportunities not to go to those meetings. He would take every opportunity to turn up and sit in the front row of the party that he was immensely proud of. He is part of that wonderful wartime generation that served their country both on the battlefield and in the parliament. He was an inspiration to many people. He was a great friend to me and my wife, Tanya, and those people who knew him and dealt with him will miss his great contribution to Australian life.

Honourable members—Hear, hear!

The SPEAKER—Order! As a mark of respect, I invite honourable members to rise in their places.

Honourable members having stood in their places—

The SPEAKER—I thank the House.

Debate (on motion by **Mr Albanese**) adjourned.