

**GORDON WISE — TRIBUTE**

*Statement*

**HON DR SALLY TALBOT (South West)** [6.33 pm]: On 25 February 2016 I made a statement in this Parliament paying tribute to a remarkable man, Gordon Wise, who had a few months earlier been awarded France's highest honour, the Légion d'honneur. The award was a recognition by the French of the significant role played by service men and women of other nations to the liberation of France during the Second World War. Although I was able to tell only a small portion of Gordon's story in my statement that evening, I hope I was able to give members a sense of a remarkable man whose devotion to duty as an airman during the war was followed by a long life of deep spiritual conviction during which he never resiled from his profound commitment to a fine and inspiring set of values.

I am sorry to tell the house now that Gordon Wise has died. He passed away at his home in Ticehurst, East Sussex, in the UK, early in the morning of Sunday, 4 October 2020. It is fitting, I think, that this Parliament note Gordon's passing and, in so doing, send its condolences to Gordon's wife, Marjory, and his family. Gordon was the son of Frank Wise, who became the sixteenth Premier of Western Australia in 1945, having been elected, along with Bert Hawke and John Tonkin, as a Labor member of Parliament in 1933. Gordon was born in Queensland in 1923 and spent time in both Broome and Carnarvon before arriving in Perth in the year his father entered Parliament. He was a scholarship student at Perth Modern School, then when he was 18 years old he joined the Royal Australian Air Force, where he saw several years of active service during the Second World War.

In 2006, Gordon published an autobiography, dedicated "To my Australian family, who may wonder how I spent the past 83 years". His opening words are "I am an ordinary Australian", but within a few lines he is describing conversations with giant personalities who include Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden, Clement Atlee, John Curtin, Konrad Adenauer and Jawaharlal Nehru. A delightful paragraph follows this list, and I will quote from his book, according to my note —

"So what?" you may say. I am reminded of one of Fredrick the Great's advisors who said, 'That general is a great military leader.' 'Why?' asked the Emperor. 'He has been in four wars,' answered the advisor. The Emperor riposted, 'You see that mule? He has been in five wars but he is still a mule.' So in writing down some memories, it may become clear that I have not improved much on the mule—though a mule, I am bound to say, is a very useful beast in the right place at the right time."

Gordon has been interviewed about his memories of John Curtin, and the transcripts, which are held in the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, make great reading. Their first meeting was around 1937 when Gordon had wandered from school into town to get a lift home with his father, who was at that stage a state government minister. They found Curtin, who was by then Leader of the Opposition, waiting at a bus stop on Mounts Bay Road and gave him a lift back to Cottesloe. Here is how Gordon described a later meeting, after Curtin became Prime Minister, when Gordon and his friend Jim Coulter went to London on a break from Air Force training leading up to D-day. The following conversation is reported verbatim and I quote from my note —

We went to London and we heard, because the papers then didn't say much about what was happening with national leaders, but we heard that John Curtin was coming for a Dominion Prime Ministers Conference. He went to America and landed [in Britain] by ship on April 29. So as we knew his private secretary, Fred McLaughlin, Coulter and I went off down to The Strand to Australia House. We had the temerity to find our way to Fred McLaughlin's office and said, 'any chance of shaking hands with the Prime Minister?' Fred being his private secretary and in command of the diary said, 'There's just no chance, his time is totally booked.' We felt a bit disappointed but came outside. As we stood on the pavement for a minute a big black Daimler car pulled up with an Australian flag. So we thought well that's possibly the Prime Minister's car, why don't we just wait and at least see him drive off? So we stood there and then Curtin came out soon after. Seeing our uniforms, the RAAF, he came straight across to us and he talked to Jim first who was closest to him. 'What's your name?' And so Jim said, 'My name is Jim Coulter, from Perth.' He said 'Any relation to Jack Coulter, Plaza Theatre manager?' So Jim said, 'My father.' 'Oh.' he said 'I know him.' And then he said to me, 'What's your name?' I said 'Gordon Wise.' He said 'The son of Frank Wise?, I've got a letter for you from your father.' So he said 'Hop in the car.', and came to the hotel.

So there we were jumping in the car with the Prime Minister and we went round to the Savoy Hotel which was five minutes drive down the Strand. So he said, 'Come up to my hotel bedroom.' He said 'I've got to change my clothes, I've got to go to the Palace for an event.' So he said 'We can talk up in my bedroom and I'll get the letter for you.' So we went up to his room and we sat in the sitting room. He went into the bedroom and proceeded to put on his striped trousers and what have you for going to meet George VI and the other Prime Ministers while chatting away to us. It was an extraordinary moment because there you had the Prime Minister of our country chatting away while he changed his clothes in the next room getting ready to go to the Palace and totally involved with us. So he found the letter from Dad which he had brought.

The COVID-19 restrictions currently in place in the United Kingdom meant that that Gordon's funeral service last week was small and private and many people are sad that they could not be with Marjory and her family to pay fitting tribute to Gordon at his funeral. Marjory says that the family knew that Gordon was comfortable and peaceful in his last hours, laughing with one of his carers and pointing upwards to indicate where he was heading on his next journey. His family feels grateful that he is now released from the difficulties of his long illness, while noting how amazingly well he coped with those difficulties.

Thanks to our former colleague in this place John Cowdell, who was a close friend of Gordon's for many years, I am able to share with honourable members an account of Gordon's funeral by Mike Deeks, Western Australia's Agent General, who was one of only 30 people able to attend. According to my notes, Mr Deeks wrote in an email —

It was a very simple graveside affair with us all carefully spaced out as per the rules. Marjory had arranged for the three local ministers (Catholic, Anglican and, I think, Presbyterian) to all participate in the Service in accordance with Gordon's wishes. Amazing Grace was played at the start of the service and Peter Allen singing 'I Still Call Australia Home' at the end [...]. The coffin was made from banana leaves and is entirely biodegradable. The Aussie flag and Gordon's medals were on the coffin along with some beautiful flowers. I was presented with the flag and medals during the service, which was unexpected and a nice touch. Marjory was, as expected, very stoic. Her son Gordon and his partner, Michael [...] were great support to her.

Mr Deeks also placed a notice in *The West Australian* of Monday, 12 October calling Gordon a man who devoted his life to others. WA family members paid their tribute on 14 October, expressing their great affection for Gordon and his remarkable life of service to others across the world. Gordon's quiet funeral is in stark contrast to the state funeral accorded to his father, Frank, in 1986. I will again quote from Gordon's autobiography, which, according to my notes states —

To experience the full magnificence and graciousness of Western Australia's last tribute to my father was overwhelming. There were twelve pallbearers, headed by the Premier, Brian Burke, with Kim Beazley, Junior, federal minister of Defence, representing Prime Minister Bob Hawke. The entire state cabinet attended the service in the Cathedral, together with three former state Premiers, the leaders of the opposition, the senior churchmen, the judiciary, the consular corps and the service chiefs. The Archbishop of Perth came back from retreat to give the blessing..."

Gordon tells us that his father was twice offered a knighthood—in 1948 and 1954. It was, he notes, Labor Party policy not to accept old Empire knighthoods so both times his father sent back telegrams saying "Beg to decline" which apparently was the established code to ensure news of the refusal did not leak publicly. Frank, however, added the words, "Have not deserved it." I cannot help thinking that Gordon's response would have been very similar. He was clearly a modest man, who was loved and respected by his many friends for his grace and humility. Gordon did not deserve a modest send-off and Marjory has said that there will be a full celebration of Gordon's life at some stage in the future. In the meantime, I know that members will want to join me in expressing our sadness at the loss of a fine man.

**The PRESIDENT:** I add my condolences to the Wise family on Gordon's passing.