

WEST GATE BRIDGE DISASTER

Statement by Member for Mount Lawley

MR S.A. MILLMAN (Mount Lawley) [12.52 pm]: Today marks the fiftieth anniversary of one of the most significant industrial accidents in the construction industry in Australia—that is, the collapse of the West Gate Bridge in Melbourne. The events leading up to the bridge’s collapse were a perfect storm of engineering failures and safety neglect. One section of the bridge—2 000 tonnes of steel and concrete—plummeted 50 metres to the ground and landed on the crib huts where workers were having their lunch break, crushing them to death. In total, 35 workers were killed that day. They included boilermakers, welders, scaffolders, carpenters, riggers, engineers and ironworkers. A royal commission into the disaster was scathing of the design and methods used by the two companies building the bridge—John Holland and World Services—and the attempts to rectify the fatal engineering flaws.

My dad worked as a plasterer in the construction industry in Victoria in the late 1960s and 1970s. He remembers that there was a significant improvement in occupational health and safety after the tragedy. To properly honour the memories of all workers who have died at work, we should always be pushing to improve workplace health and safety, and we should not wait for tragedies like this to occur to make those improvements. At a time when workplace fatalities still dominate our headlines, the lessons of this disaster remain as relevant today as they did 50 years ago. I will give the last word to one of the workers who was there at the time. Pat Preston, reflecting on the annual memorial held at the site, as quoted in an ABC article by Tim Callanan, said —

“We get there every year to honour the dead and fight like hell for the living.”