

HON OSCAR (NEIL) BLACKBURNE OLIVER

Condolence Motion

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the House) [10.02 am] — without notice: I move —

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

Hon Neil Oliver was born on 16 August 1933 in Caulfield, Victoria, and passed away on 9 July 2019 in Perth. He was the son of Oscar and Elizabeth. He attended Caulfield Grammar School and later the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, where he studied for a Diploma of Wool Technology. Neil had a long career as a wool broker in Victoria, New Zealand and Western Australia between 1958 and 1977, but it was perhaps his service to the Australian military over the same period that he is remembered for, as an officer cadet in the Australian Army between 1952 and 1954, and then with the Citizen Military Forces—known now as the Australian Army Reserve—from 1954 to 1977. Neil rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel and was awarded both the Efficiency Decoration and Reserve Force Decoration. He saw active service in Malaysia and the Vietnam War.

Neil moved to Perth in 1963, just one year after marrying his wife, Margaret, and together they had two sons and a daughter. Tragically, one of his sons, Craig, would later attract national media attention following his death in a plane crash carrying the entire board of the mining company Sundance Resources.

Neil was elected to the Legislative Council for West Province and made a significant contribution to this Parliament over 12 years between 1977 and 1989. His inaugural speech outlined an interest in upholding law and order, and tackling issues relating to small enterprise. It also provides for some interesting reflections of the times that perhaps provoke the thought that some things change, while others remain the same.

Neil was clearly passionate about building the respect of Parliament and parliamentarians. He said —

I would like our Parliament to rise to the status of the highest and most widely respected forum of community discussion on vital issues ... Parliamentary debate should have such a fire and conviction and quality as to arouse public interest, and build public consensus.

He went on to say —

... I want to make it clear that I recognise the basic challenge is to Parliament itself to be relevant—to be part of the community, and not simply a law-makers club in an ivory tower on the top of a hill.

Those are values and ideals that politicians across the nation continue to strive towards long after that contribution from Neil. It seems that Neil managed to pre-empt the 24-hour news cycle that politicians find themselves in today. In that same speech in 1977 he said —

A high level of public reportage of parliamentary debate should be the contribution of the public media. Here is a duty that the media should not ignore. The coverage of sensations is not enough. Debate of society's fundamental value must attract more respect, and I challenge the media to be self critical as well as critical in its coverage of Parliament.

That is a sentiment we might share today. Neil served on a number of parliamentary committees throughout his political career. His genuine interest in defending the public interest and his professional conduct on those committees was respected by all. Outside Parliament, Neil was heavily involved in many community groups and organisations including the WA Employers' Federation, which later became the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia; the Confederation of WA Industry; the Housing Industry Association; the Returned and Services League; the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Western Australia; Rotary; and the Army Museum of Western Australia, where he served as vice-president.

A former member of this place Hon Tom Stephens, provided me with the following reflections on Neil. He said that Neil worked long and hard, was a true Liberal, always a gentleman and was respected by all, and in retirement he remained a regular in the parliamentary gym.

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

HON PETER COLLIER (North Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [10.07 am]: Neil Oliver led a life dedicated to private enterprise, the defence of Australia, and the Liberal Party. He was the son of a civil engineer, born in Caulfield, Melbourne in August 1933. Neil was educated at Caulfield Grammar School and obtained a Diploma of Wool Technology at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, also training as an Officer Cadet with the Royal Australian Army from 1952 to 1954. This commenced a service of 23 years to the Citizen Military

Forces that only ceased on his election to Parliament. He served with the Australian Regular Army in Malaya in 1957 and was promoted as the youngest major in the Army in 1961. He served and was wounded in South Vietnam in 1968, receiving his final promotion to lieutenant colonel in 1971. He was awarded the Efficiency Decoration in 1968, with a bar added in 1973, and the Reserve Force Decoration in 1982. From 1978 to 1988 he was Honorary Colonel of the Royal Australian Corps of Transport. He remained a constant member of the Returned and Services League and was a founding member, director and vice-president of the Army Museum of Western Australia for many years from 1977.

From 1958 Neil Oliver built a civilian career as a wool broker in his family business working in Victoria, New Zealand and Western Australia where he settled in 1963, having married his wife, Margaret Joy, the previous year. This work took him to North America, Eastern Europe and Beirut in 1965–66. He became involved in the construction industry, serving as president of the Housing Industry Association between 1975 and 1977. He also chaired the Australian Government Desirable Levels of Housing and Construction Indicative Planning Council of WA. From 1974 to 1981 he was a committee member of the WA Employers' Federation. His community involvement included board membership of Churchlands and Western Australian Colleges of Advanced Education from 1968 to 1981; membership of Rotary and of the Guildford Grammar School and Edith Cowan University Foundations; presidency of the Multiple Sclerosis Society of WA; and patron of the Bayswater–Morley District Cricket Club. In his younger days in Melbourne, he was a keen yachtsman and a member of a winning Australian championship crew in the Stonehaven Cup.

Neil Oliver first joined the Liberal Party in 1951, and in 1974 became the Western Australian convenor of the activist group Putting Australia Right. In 1976, he was selected by the Liberal Party to succeed Hon Roy Abbey in the West Province of the Legislative Council. This was a semi-rural outer suburban electorate comprising the Legislative Assembly districts of Mundaring, Kalamunda and Darling Range, extending from Toodyay to Roleystone and including the Swan Valley. In February 1977, he was elected with a majority of 4 749 votes in a poll of nearly 21 000—61.3 per cent in a straight contest with the Australian Labor Party. Neil's campaign contributed to the success of the Liberal Party in capturing the seat of Mundaring for the first time.

In his first speech in the Legislative Council in August 1977, Neil Oliver expressed his strong commitment to free enterprise by stating —

Parliament has given too much attention to the making of laws and not enough to the giving of leadership.

He further stated —

Laws which serve only official purposes or express only a political fanaticism over petty detail invite disrespect and rejection. By doing so, they undermine respect for law which is vital for the preservation of real standards in the community.

In particular, he said —

In housing, the dead weight of laws and regulations is threatening the very survival of the private home. Cost has been added to cost, all piled on the altar of narrow subservience to theoretical standards that have long since buried common sense.

Neil Oliver always retained this passion.

Despite a strong statewide swing against the O'Connor coalition government, he won a second six-year term in 1983, with a majority of 1 744 votes—53.7 per cent in a poll of 23 500. In the ensuing six years in opposition he was deeply concerned by allegations of government abuse and impropriety, which he sought to highlight through his service as a member of both the Select Committee on the Sale of the Midland Saleyards in 1986–87, and the Select Committee on the Management of Burswood in 1988. He also took a leading role in opposing and questioning the role of government-sponsored bodies operating in the private sector. Neil chaired both the Liberal Party Economic and Employment Council from 1984 to 1986, and the Standing Committee on Resources Development and Finance from 1986 to 1988. He used his business experience and connections to ensure the success of a Confederation of Industry mission to Malaysia that included Bill Hassell as Leader of the Opposition. It was said of Neil that he never looked for approbation as he was simply a “doer”. His strong belief in Liberal ideology and public debate led to his involvement in organising the Achievements of Democratic Capitalism conferences in Sydney and Melbourne, including such speakers as Geoffrey Blainey and leading British journalists.

When the 1988 redistribution replaced the 17 two-member provinces with the current six Legislative Council regions, West Province was absorbed into the East Metropolitan Region. Rather than seeking Liberal preselection for the new region, Neil Oliver contested the redrawn Legislative Assembly district of Swan Hills that replaced Mundaring and included a large section of Midland. At the 1989 election, he gained a significant swing in this key seat, but polled 48.5 per cent after preferences, falling short by 529 votes. After leaving Parliament, Neil Oliver resumed his business career as a director of companies in the fields of paper pulp and housing. Sadly, he was severely impacted by a failed property investment caused by the apparent dishonesty of others, and in 2010 he suffered the tragic loss of his son Craig in the Sundance mining company air crash. He retained the respect and loyalty of many political and business

colleagues. His continued Liberal Party involvement was acknowledged by a meritorious service award at the 2018 state conference of the party, and at his passing he remained a committee member of the party's Dalkeith branch.

We extend our condolences to Mrs Joy Oliver, his family and his loyal friends.

HON SIMON O'BRIEN (South Metropolitan) [10.14 am]: Many members in this place would not realise that they had encountered Hon Neil Oliver in the corridors of Parliament House. He was a frequent visitor to the house, up until quite recently. Although they may never have met him, members would have recognised him if they had seen him again in the corridors of Parliament. Sadly, we will not see him again. We rise today to pay tribute to our former member. From the testimony we have just heard from the Leader of the House and the Leader of the Opposition, it will be apparent to all members, whether they knew him or not, that he was a man of very considerable integrity who lived a life of many endeavours. In the course of his life, he made a number of very significant achievements. He also suffered a number of setbacks, and just now we have heard about some elements of personal tragedy. Through all of it, he upheld standards of integrity that should apply in public life. That is the legacy that I hope members will remember him for. The comments we have been reminded of that hark back to his maiden speech struck a chord with me and I hope they have also struck a chord with all members of this place.

As members, we all come and go as time goes by, but Parliament endures. Whether he was in it or out of it, Neil Oliver understood the importance of Parliament. That is why he admonished others in the media, for example, to take note of and to understand what happens in the Parliament. He admonished everyone in our community to appreciate our institutions and to ensure that they are preserved and protected. There is a lesson for all members, current membership and members yet to come, to make sure that we uphold the standards and aspirations of those who have built our great institutions before us, so that we make sure that we pass them on to generations yet to come.

On a personal note, I never served in the place with Neil Oliver, but I knew him quite well because every time I stood for election, for example, and either failed or later succeeded, he was there to encourage and to offer wisdom and fellowship. I hope that on occasions, including in the last decade, when he was going through rough times, I managed to repay some of that concern that he had expressed and offered to me in the past.

Through all of that, I now join all members in supporting his condolence motion, which honours his memory. Farewell, Neil; may you rest in peace.

HON MICHAEL MISCHIN (North Metropolitan — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [10.18 am]: I rise to pay my respects to the late Neil Oliver. I came to know Hon Neil Oliver as a fellow member of my branch, following my joining the Liberal Party in the early 1990s. I, of course, never had the opportunity to see him in action in Parliament. However, I came to know him as a man of quiet dignity, a gentleman and a great supporter of the Liberal cause, the party and its values. As has been mentioned, he was a frequent visitor to this place after his retirement and I would not infrequently run into him in the corridors. Whenever I did, he took the time to share his reflections on the state of politics and the state of the state. They were always thoughtful and considered. As I mentioned, he always displayed a quiet dignity and very pleasant aspect. After our discussions, he would always very kindly express his support for me and encouragement to me. I valued that from him as a former member of this place and an experienced parliamentarian and politician. I simply want to thank him—albeit too late for him to hear it—once again for his support and the kindness and the friendship that he extended to me. Vale, Neil. May he rest in peace.

HON COLIN HOLT (South West) [10.20 am]: I rise on behalf of the Nationals WA to acknowledge the passing of Hon Neil Oliver and to send our condolences to his family and friends. Listening to the contributions made so far, I reflect that Neil's contribution to our community and society went far beyond this house. I always find it a little sad when we have condolence motions, but it is also a time to reflect on the contributions made by former members and also our role here, while we are here, and how we are trying to improve the lot of society. Obviously, he made an enduring contribution that will have an enduring effect beyond this place. On behalf of the Nationals WA, I would like to thank him for his service. We would like to thank his family for allowing him to give that service, and I think they should be very proud of the man Hon Neil Oliver was.

THE PRESIDENT (Hon Kate Doust) [10.21 am]: Members, I will add a few words to this condolence motion. I offer my condolences to the Oliver family on the passing of Hon Neil Oliver. I echo the words of Hon Colin Holt about the importance of these types of motions to acknowledge the contribution of former members, not just to this place, but also to the broader community during their time as a member and, more often than not, in the work they continue to do in the community after they leave this place. I know that certainly for Hon Neil Oliver, that was the case; indeed, he was a frequent visitor to this building. My more recent interactions with him were in my capacity as President. He would drop in from time to time to discuss activities that he was involved with in bringing certain community groups into this place. He was always very engaging and very keen to continue his involvement in the community, which is to be applauded, because sometimes when people leave here, they move on to another pathway in a different element of their life. But he obviously chose to continue participating in those things that he was interested in.

Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Peter Collier; Hon Simon O'Brien; Hon Michael Mischin; Hon Colin Holt; President

Hon Neil Oliver leaves a permanent memento to this place. I am not sure whether members are aware that since his time here, all of my predecessors have used his desk in the President's office. I still use his desk in the President's office. In his last visit to my office, I think he was actually coming in to see whether it was still in place and whether I was still happy using that desk. We had an interesting discussion about that. I thank members for their contributions today. I think it is important that we acknowledge and put on the record the work that that member did. Certainly, for members of the party that he was in, it is important to acknowledge the role he played both within the Parliament and within the party. Given that his family would have missed him from time to time, they need to know the significance of the work he did and the contribution he made to this state. I thank members for their contributions.

In putting this motion, I now ask that members rise and stand in their places to indicate their support for the motion and to observe one-minute's silence in memory of Hon Oscar Neil Blackburne Oliver, the former member for West Province.

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* transcript of this condolence motion will be forwarded to Hon Neil Oliver's family.