

In Afghanistan, our soldiers are doing the most difficult work in the most dangerous conditions. They are truly in the front line in the battle against terror. In that role, they continue the Anzac tradition of Australians being in the front rank of the global struggle to defend the values of liberty and democracy on which our nation was founded. They are doing a great job—and a vital one, but it is very dangerous work. That is why the thoughts and prayers of all Australians should be with them always. Today we honour the service and the sacrifice of a true Anzac, Private Greg Sher. Our prayers are with his family and today this parliament extends the nation's gratitude.

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.

MAIN COMMITTEE

Condolence: Private Gregory Sher

Reference

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Leader of the House) (2.09 pm)—I move:

That the resumption of debate on the Prime Minister's motion of condolence in connection with the death of Private Gregory Sher be referred to the Main Committee.

Question agreed to.

CONDOLENCES

Hon. Peter Howson CMG

Mr RUDD (Griffith—Prime Minister) (2.09 pm)—I move:

That the House expresses its deep regret at the death on 1 February 2009, of the Honourable Peter Howson CMG, a former Federal Minister and Member for Fawkner and Casey, and place on record its appreciation of his long and meritorious public service, and tender its profound sympathy to his family in their bereavement.

Peter Howson was born on 22 May 1919 in London to Major George Howson and Jessie Howson. He was educated at Stowe School and Trinity College, Cambridge, where he received a Master of Arts. He enlisted in the Royal Navy as a pilot and in the Fleet Air Arm in 1940 and progressed to the rank of Lieutenant. He left the Navy in 1946 and came to Australia.

Mr Howson served in five successive coalition governments under Prime Ministers Menzies, Holt, McEwen, Gorton and McMahon from the mid-50s until the 1970s. He first entered parliament in 1955 as a Liberal Party member representing the Victorian seat of Fawkner. After the abolition of that division in 1969, he represented the seat of Casey until his defeat in the 1972 election. Peter Howson held the position of Government Whip from 1963 to 1964, before being appointed as the Minister for Air, a defence portfolio that

oversaw Australia's air defences. He held that portfolio from 1964 to 1968. In 1971 Peter Howson became Australia's first environment minister when he took responsibility for the portfolio covering the environment, Aborigines and the arts.

Through his parliamentary life Peter Howson served on a number of parliamentary committees, including the Privileges Committee and the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs. In 1960 in particular he became a member of the House of Representatives Select Committee on the Voting Rights of Aborigines, which travelled extensively around the country amassing a great deal of evidence that laid the foundation for the referendum on the constitutional status of Aborigines. This was important and very good work. That committee work led to an enduring interest in Indigenous affairs, and Peter Howson continued to contribute to policy debates in recent years in newspapers and publications such as *Quadrant*.

Peter Howson was an active participant during his parliamentary career in the work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association both in Australia and internationally. After he departed from Canberra in 1972 he continued as an associate CPA member. His contribution to parliamentary affairs was recognised in 1980 when he was awarded a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George. Throughout his life he retained a strong interest in parliamentary matters and was in touch with the Parliamentary Relations Office as recently as December 2008 seeking assistance with some research that he was undertaking. Peter Howson also made an important contribution to the political history of his era and in particular of conservative politics when he published *The Howson Diaries: the Life of Politics*—a publication that was put onto the bookshelves of the book stores of the nation back in 1984. Peter Howson was a true veteran of the Liberal Party. He was a great contributor to the life of this parliament and I make particular mention of his contribution to the great work of extending proper recognition to Aboriginal people in this country. On behalf of the government I offer our condolences to his family.

Mr TURNBULL (Wentworth—Leader of the Opposition) (2.13 pm)—I rise today to join the Prime Minister in offering the condolences of the opposition on the passing of Peter Howson, former minister. One Canberra journalist recalled Peter Howson as 'active, energetic, ambitious and full of confidence'. I think that all those who knew him would regard that as an understatement—he was a true enthusiast. He settled in Australia, coming from the United Kingdom, in the 1940s and believed passionately in his adopted country, Australia. So much so, that in his maiden speech to parliament on 6 March 1956 he suggested that we should promote Australian products to British house-

wives by coining the slogan ‘Get Australia on the Front of the Can’.

He then went on to serve in this parliament in many capacities, including as the Minister for Air, the Minister Assisting the Treasurer and the Minister in charge of Tourist Activities. However, his most notable appointment—his most memorable one—was, as the Prime Minister noted, his appointment as the first minister for the environment and also, as part of that role, as the first minister for Indigenous affairs. His title was Minister for Environment, Aborigines and the Arts. We on this side of the House are very proud that it was a coalition government that appointed Peter Howson as the first minister for Indigenous affairs. We are proud of his record, and indeed our record, in leading the support for creating equal rights and opportunities for Indigenous Australians. We are proud that it was a Liberal government, under Prime Minister Harold Holt, that in 1967 took the vote to the people in a referendum that was carried to remove the impediments for the Commonwealth government to make special laws with respect to Aboriginal people and, on removing the impediments, to count Aboriginal people in the census. We are also on this side proud to have elected Senator Neville Bonner in 1971, who in 1972 became the first Indigenous Australian to be elected to any parliament in Australia, serving the good people of Queensland for 12 years until 1983.

Peter Howson, in recognition of his services to the parliament and to the community, was appointed a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George in December 1980 and in 2001 was awarded the Centenary Medal in recognition of his long and devoted service to improving conditions for Indigenous people. Peter Howson was Vice President of the Bennelong Society and he campaigned tirelessly for real outcomes for Indigenous Australians.

Peter Howson led a long and full life of public service. He made a great contribution not just to this place, not just to the many issues and responsibilities he took on as a minister but, after he left this parliament, to the cause of justice for Indigenous Australians, and he continued that hard work right up until his death. It was a long and good life and our thoughts and prayers are with his family.

Private Gregory Sher

Hon. Peter Howson CMG

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, 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 ca-

reer came to an end, and he suffered the double blow that the seat of Fawcner 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.

MAIN COMMITTEE

Condolence: Hon. Peter Howson CMG

Reference

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler—Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government) (2.25 pm)—by leave—I move:

That the resumption of debate on the Prime Minister's motion of condolence in connection with the death of the Hon. Peter Howson CMG be referred to the Main Committee.

Question agreed to.

TROOPER MARK DONALDSON VC

Mr RUDD (Griffith—Prime Minister) (2.25 pm)—On indulgence, to mark an occasion of national significance in the awarding of the Victoria Cross to Trooper Mark Donaldson VC on 16 January 2009: the Victoria Cross is a military award unlike any other. Inscribed across the medal are simply the words 'For valour', but in those two words, this highest of Australian military honours tells the stories of many heroes. In January of this year, Trooper Mark Donaldson joined the ranks of these heroes. Not only is Trooper Donaldson the first to receive this highest military honour in 40 years but he is also the very first to receive the Victoria Cross of Australia, which is the national form of this historic award that was established nearly 20 years ago. It is awarded to those who 'in the presence of the enemy display the most conspicuous gallantry, a daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty'. I can think of no better way to honour Trooper Donaldson than by quoting from the unadorned military prose of his citation. It refers to what happened when the patrol, finally having extracted itself from the ambush in Afghanistan after two hours of fierce fighting, realised that a wounded coalition force interpreter had been left behind. The citation says:

Of his own volition and displaying complete disregard for his own safety, Trooper Donaldson moved alone, on foot, across approximately 80 metres of exposed ground to recover the wounded interpreter. His movement, once identified by the enemy, drew intense and accurate machine gun fire from entrenched positions. Upon reaching the wounded coalition force interpreter, Trooper Donaldson picked him up and carried him back to the relative safety of the vehicles, then provided immediate first aid before returning to the fight.

For honourable members and anyone listening to this debate, I would draw their attention to the full rendition of Trooper Donaldson's citation. What I have simply referred to the House is a small part of it. It is the stuff of heroes; it is quite extraordinary to read. As I said on the day, which both the Leader of the Opposition and I attended, when the Victoria Cross was awarded to Trooper Donaldson, when I first read of the citation and read it, I had to read it again and again. The courage that this bloke displayed in full engage-