

THE HONOURABLE TOM STEPHENS MLA : KIMBERLEY SOCIAL POLITICS

Our advertised speaker, Carol Martin JP MLA, the Member for Kimberley, was unable to speak at the November 2007 meeting and we are most grateful that Tom Stephens MLA was able to step in at the last minute. He conveyed Carol Martin's apologies. He then spoke of his personal history of 30 years involvement in the politics of the Kimberley; the history of previous political representatives; citizenship issues; and some aspects of the current challenges facing the region.

Tom Stephens is the Member of the Legislative Assembly for Central Kimberley-Pilbara; former Minister for Housing & Works; Local Government & Regional Development; and Kimberley; and long time Kimberley Society member. He has represented the people of the Kimberley region in the state parliament since 1982.

After several years of uncompleted studies for the Catholic priesthood, Tom arrived in Kununurra from Port Keats to work for the local Mirriuwung people. He had three rather tenuous previous connections with the Kimberley: his uncle's father named Fox (after whom the Fox River was named) had driven cattle from Queensland to Halls Creek to sell to the gold prospectors; and while in his first year at his seminary, Mary Durack's *Kings in Grass Castles* was read aloud at meal times in the College Dining Room; and he later met up with a Pallotine priest from the Kimberley (Peter Willis), whose links led him to his first Kimberley employment. He was met at the local airport by community leaders and soon became absorbed in the advocacy for the Aboriginal community.

Tom conceived the idea of a regional land council, which became a reality—through joint work with anthropologist Kim Akerman—at the great Noonkanbah dance meeting of Aboriginal people from all over the Kimberley in May 1978, and he became the first executive director of the Kimberley Land Council. This was shortly before the AMAX and drilling exploration, which led to the famous convoy and uproar.

The seat of the Kimberley (when first combined) was held by Francis O'Connor (1904-05); then Arthur Male, who was Sam's father (1905-17); M P Durack, who was our member Perpetua's grandfather (1917-24); A A Coverley (1924-53, ALP); Jack Rhatigan, who was our member Sister Pat's dad (1953-68, ALP); Alan Ridge (1968-1980, Liberal); before Ernie Bridge (1980-2001, ALP).

These personal histories linked people from the pastoral, pearling, business, government, and working-man's life of the region.

Coverley, whose period in office was the longest, was just one of these colourful characters. He told Tom's wife's uncle, Doug Davidson, who ran against him in 1947, that he would return to life as a shearer's cook if he was defeated!

Jack Rhatigan was next – his parents had run the old Turkey Creek boarding house (sometimes known as the hotel) that operated alongside the police post from the early 1900s. Rhatigan lost the seat to Alan Ridge in the turmoil that followed the granting of citizenship rights in the late sixties.

Then came Ernie Bridge. He had been elected to the Halls Creek local government at the young age of 21, when his father died suddenly. He served that local Council for 21 years, including many years as Shire President, before he first ran for and was eventually elected to the State Parliament as the first WA Aboriginal MP. He was ultimately the first Aboriginal Cabinet Minister in Australia.

We were taken through the history of the Aboriginal community of the region to secure their right and opportunity to vote – against a bewildering backdrop of a number of moves to restrict aboriginal voters – the first of which was defeated by the actions of Tom Dadour and the vote of Speaker Ian Thompson. This was followed by the alteration of electoral boundaries (directly by the politicians); restriction of postal voting aimed at remote communities (over which Tom was incarcerated in Wyndham prison but acquitted); and, strangest of all, the delivery of a drum of port to Turkey Creek on election eve where Tom was the first advisor at that community.

The challenge of Aboriginal communities was addressed. Tom spoke of the need for Aboriginal groups to be able to get away from the towns where alcohol and more recently the rise of drug abuse, are pervasive problems. He stressed the need to support communities, although noting that success was not widespread.

The recent restriction to light beer for takeaway at Fitzroy Crossing has brought a dramatic improvement in the town despite what Tom and others see as the less than objective reporting in *The West Australian*.

There then followed lively questions and discussion.

Hamish McGlashan