

Prime Minister

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

TRANSCRIPT OF REMARKS AT THE STATE FUNERAL

FOR BERNIE BANTON AM

SYDNEY

5 DECEMBER 2007

PM: Today the nation gathers together to honour a great Australian life, a great Australian hero, a hero in an age when we've all become so cynical we didn't believe there would be heroes anymore.

Bernie Banton is an Australian hero.

An extraordinary bloke.

He would describe himself as an ordinary bloke.

An ordinary bloke with an extraordinary heart who led an extraordinary life.

He had a heart as big as Pharlap and a heart tempered by an iron will, a determination, an iron determination never to wallow in self pity, never just to emote and to cause tears to come to our eyes but an iron determination to act.

An iron determination to bring justice to working people who otherwise would have none.

And above all, an iron determination to prevail.

Bernie's fight was for those who suffered from asbestos-related diseases.

For the workers covered in dust.

For their wives and their mums who loyally, daily washed their dust covered clothes and the families who lost loved ones and lost their livelihoods as a result.

But Bernie's fight became something bigger and broader again and that is where Bernie reached out and touched the Australian soul, reminding us all of what it is to be Australian.

Reminding us all of the need to look out for one another.

Reminding us all that in this great country, Australia, we demand a fair go for all, not just for some.

In short, Bernie became the symbol, the living symbol, the continuing symbol of basic human decency.

When I called around to see Bernie and Karen and Dean at their West Pennant Hills home a month or so ago, Bernie and I yakked and yakked and yakked and yakked for nearly an hour.

I doubt that I helped Bernie very much at all.

But what I know is that Bernie helped me a lot, lifting my eyes beyond the ruck and maul of an election campaign to remind me of what it was all about - the purpose of our great enterprise to build a decent future for all working families.

I left with a spring in my step and I'll always remember that discussion that day.

Bernie asked only one thing of me before I left him that day and that was this: to pay a public tribute to the great Australian trade union movement.

To the unions who stood by him through thick and thin when others did not.

To the union leaders who stood by him through thick and then when others did not.

And as Bernie said to me, “Kevin, were it not for the unions, I could never have prevailed in my fight for justice.”

So, today, on Bernie’s behalf, I salute the role of these unions in bringing justice to working people.

And now we come to say goodbye to Bernie.

I believe Bernie Banton will be honoured in the future more than prime ministers, more than premiers, more than politicians, more than captains of industry.

And so he should.

Because Bernie was an ordinary bloke who decided to become something extraordinary and through that became an extraordinary hero in our age, an age where we feared we would no longer have heroes anymore.

We will sit down with Bernie’s family soon to work out how best to honour his memory into the future.

For Karen and Bernie’s children, your grief is greater today than anyone’s because the truth is, Bernie died too young, just too young.

Bernie, I’ll miss you, mate.

Bernie, the nation will miss you, mate.

And our great Australian family is poorer for your passing, the passing of this extraordinary Australian hero.