



## A Busy Life

Hon Neil Robson AM

Born at Smithton, Tasmania, on the 5th July 1928. As Dr Packham had had many calls during the day, Nurse Bates officiated at the birth at 4:30 a.m. at home on the top of Tier Hill in Emmet Street. Nurse Bates and I met years later. It was a mutual dislike.

My father was a returned soldier from the 1st World War who had been gassed in France and who contracted tuberculosis and died in Roma, Queensland, 3 months after my birth. He came from Sheffield in Tasmania where his father "built & buried" - Sheffield. He was a builder *cum* undertaker. My father was a saddler by trade, owning his own business in Smithton.

My mother was born near Yarmouth in England, and came to Tasmania when her father retired from the British Imperial Army in Aden, in the Middle East. On arrival in Smithton he became the first Harbour Master and went on to help form The Duck River Butter Factory, becoming the first General Manager and then subsequently Managing Director.

Not long after my father died, my mother left me with her mother and settled with my elder brother Bruce in Launceston, where she became a gifted clerk. I was fascinated by her ability to add up three columns of figures carrying the subtotals in her head, and then write the total answer at the bottom of the sheet of paper.

I lived with my grandparents until approximately 1938 when they both died within three months of one another. Two of my uncles who had lived at home cared for me by employing a housekeeper, a Miss Amy Webster. A very religious person. When she first walked up our front garden path, I shot her on the bum with a home made bow and arrow. After that we became firm friends. At times this friendship was strained as on one particular day, when stripping for a bath, she found a blue-tongued lizard in my singlet, and four baby snakes in a tobacco tin in my pocket. These latter years at Smithton saw me fishing with my uncles, who allowed me a line if I cleaned and carried the catch! We caught trout, blackfish, and fresh water lobsters.

I taught myself to swim in the Duck River at Smithton. There was an old derelict wharf on the river with a large hole in the upper decking. On the riverside at high tide the depth was approximately 12 feet which levelled off to about 4 feet on the roadside. I used to dive in on the deep side with my arms in front, kicking like mad with my feet and when I judged I was close enough to the road shore I used to stand up in shallow water. From there it was natural to progress to a rudimentary dog paddle.

Some other boys and I used to acquire old tractor tyres, the ones about 6 feet in diameter. We used to wedge our feet in one side and then lever our hands and wrists in the other.

Those not in tyres used to stand the tyre upright and then set us on our way down Tier Hill. We were mad, we used to be violently sick. Also, it was dangerous to others and us. One day we ran over the Salvation Army officer on his bike. Another time we hit the balustrade on the wharf, flew over the top of a fishing boat tied up to the wharf at low tide and ended up in the mud.

Once we noticed a rowing boat drawn up on the water's edge near the main bridge across the Duck River with oars shipped and unattended. Another boy and I took the boat for a row. We were half way to the other side when we noticed a man gesticulating violently, obviously to us. I suggested to my friend that we pretend to row across to the other shore, and when the man ran down the foreshore we would turn about and row for the opposite shore. Well,

we had this fellow running backwards and forwards over the bridge and all was going well, until we were near to a shore my companion panicked and jumped overboard into shallow water. This spoiled my rhythm enabling the owner who had run out into the water to grab the stern of the boat and pull the boat and me ashore. He didn't hit me or give me a good hiding; he just grabbed me, threw me to the ground and rubbed my ears briskly, which I have never forgotten.

After war broke out in 1939, both these uncles joined up with the Tasmanian 2/40th Army Battalion in 1940. The Japanese killed both. I was then sent to Sheffield under care of my mother's sister Evelyn Seamons, whose husband Bert. was a Commercial Bank of Australia manager. He was a great rifle shot on rabbits and it was here in my spare time I hunted rabbits with a ferret. Also, fishing was still a favourite pastime, particularly trout fishing in the rivers around Sheffield; during this era, I first became aware of money, earning 27/6 for twelve rabbit skins when some days we used to snare 80 rabbits. My Auntie had two daughters; Beverley and Elaine, who became like sisters to me. At Sheffield I sat for a Scholarship to enter [Launceston Church Grammar School](#), which I won, and enrolled at this old school in February 1941.

At Grammar I started off at the top of the class and gradually worked my way back to near the bottom through spending too much time playing football, swimming and running. When I left some four years later my certificate stated that I had passed in certain subjects but excelled in football, swimming and athletics. I was a side drummer in the cadet band, and for a short while, was a drummer in the Caledonian Pipe Band. Legacy used to contribute towards my school fees.

I tried to join the Navy in October 1944. I asked my mother to sign a declaration that I was seventeen, when really I was sixteen, but she balked when she realized it was a Statutory Declaration. I entered Flinders Naval Depot in early August 1945. I did the necessary induction course and was posted to the then [HMAS Lonsdale shore base](#) at Port Melbourne. I was sent to work chipping rust on a destroyer, called the [H.M.A.S. Quickmatch](#). One morning, I noticed the Captain and his first Lieutenant doing their early morning walk up and down the wharf alongside the ship. I presented myself on their path, saluted the Captain and asked could I join the ship. He was so taken aback by the unorthodox method of approach that he said yes.

The first assignment for the ship was to investigate a sighting of a submarine near Heard Island. From there we did a tour of southern Australian ports. A group of the ship's company including myself marched in Adelaide and then in Hobart. From there we went to Sydney, Port Moresby, Dreger Harbour in Northern New Guinea and on to the Inland Sea in Japan as part of the BCOF ([British Commonwealth Occupation Force](#)). We made Kure our base. Whilst there, we shot up some floating mines in the Inland Sea. We were picking up isolated groups of Prisoners of War and handing them on to other ships. After our short stay in Yokohama we sailed to Kobe, where sleeping sickness was raging. All the ship's company had to be inoculated and since I was the youngest on board, I was made to go last in the long queue. The same needle was used for everybody, and had been sharpened by a carpenter's file a couple of times before my turn. The blood ran down my arm and settled in the web of my fingers. I have had a horror of needles since.

Another horror I developed was of dental drills. One day whilst on manoeuvres with a large cruiser named the Newfoundland the Captain detailed all the "boys" (young Ordinary Seamen) to visit the dentist on the cruiser. We were transported across on a flying fox, a type of suspension bridge with a pulley attached. The dentist operated on the upper deck. He had a piece of equipment similar to the old Singer sewing machine. It had a treadle, which the patient treadled. From the top there were various belts and pulleys which all ended up in the drill in the patient's mouth. All was as well as could be expected, but sometimes the ship yawed and plunged into heavy seas, and if the patient's foot slipped off the treadle, the drill became stuck in the patient's tooth. Then frantic treadling to get enough speed up to remove the drill. Not for faint hearts.

The ship then went to Sasebo where we did a people-smuggling run. The Japanese had evicted the Koreans out of Japan, many of whom were married to Japanese women and were sneaking back at night on fishing boats. At the same time they were bringing smallpox with them. Our ship used to fire warning shots across their bows, and we used to send boarding parties which sometimes included me across to the fishing boat. These boarding parties used to search the fishing boat particularly their fish holds.

From Kure we went back to the Pacific Ocean and then, on the way home, when near Guam, we encountered a monstrous typhoon, which we steamed ahead of practically to the West Coast of America. On the way back we were coming alongside the wharf in Guam when we rammed the stern of an American merchant ship, and so back to Kure for repairs.

Eventually we came back to Rushcutter in Sydney where I was transferred to [Flinders Naval Depot](#) as a guard and swimming instructor and part-time bandsman. From there I was demobilized (not discharged as I signed up for the duration of war and six months or three years, whichever the longer) I was demobilized as an Able Seaman, which is equal to a Private in the Army. This rank I obtained a couple of weeks prior to my demobilization. Ranks in the Navy were determined by age up to and including Able Seaman. This was August 1947. I passed up an entree to the University, like a fool, as I was sick of regimentation.

After a couple of years in a timber office, I joined the staff of the Launceston Bank for Savings at the Invermay Branch in October 1949. At that time I was a keen rifle shooter and spent many hours with the members of the Launceston V.D.C. Rifle Club.

Desiree Tyson and I were married in May 1949. We lived with my wife's parents for a couple of years where our eldest daughter Jill was born. We then moved to our own home in Lord Street where our son Paul was born. A short time later in December 1955, I was appointed Manager of our branch in George Town, where I stayed until December 1963. Whilst there I formed the George Town Rotary Club, (without being a Rotarian) The Students' Guidance Council, the Chamber Of Commerce, the Photographic Society and the Beaconsfield Rotary Club. Was Charter Chairman of the local Y.M.C.A, which on its inauguration had a large gymnasium built through local and State government efforts. Also, I was treasurer of the local R.S.L. I spent many hours fishing for many species of fish in the estuary waters around George Town. Most of my trout fishing was done in the Piper River.

Our youngest daughter Jan was born at our back gate, in our car on a belated race to hospital. It was on this day that I first started studying with Hemingway Robertson, who ran correspondence courses, for my Banker's degree.

When I finished this some four years later, I joined up as a student with the Australian Society of Accountants. I used to study recommended textbooks to a syllabus, and present myself at the appointed venues and sit for the examination papers. These were always held in the daytime as opposed to the night Bankers' exams. My General Manager took exception to my asking to have leave and made me pay the relieving manager's salary, his bus fare and lunch. Len Jamieson, who was a well-known cyclist, relieved me, who rode his bike down and back and refused to take money for his lunch. This must have shamed the General Manager, who forgot about the salary payment.

I left George Town in December 1963 having accepted a position in Head Office as the first Public Relations Officer for the Bank, which included Advertising Manager. In the winter of 1964 our advertising committee (which consisted of two board members Sir Raymond Ferrall and Mr Gilbert C. McKinlay O.B.E. and myself) had decided on promoting the bank to the young, to entice them to save. With the help of Channel 9 our local television station we designed a television Quiz program for the young and I was appointed the Quiz Master. I held this position for thirteen years. It went to air every Friday night at 6 p.m. for half an hour, just before the news of the day. At the same time we commenced a scholarship scheme for youngsters. A panel interviewed children after receiving applications. The bank awarded fifty scholarships each year. Concurrent with these we promoted and sponsored school choirs on television. My job was to organize these ventures and be chairman of the various panels.

The bank sponsored me to teach Decimal Currency on Television and sponsored a radio program on general knowledge, named Do You Know. Of course the bank's message was fostered.

Needless to say we went from the smallest Savings Bank to the largest in Tasmania. In 1964 I was sent overseas, (with my wife) to talk marketing with various bankers. Countries we visited were England, Scotland, France,

Holland, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and Spain. We also visited Chicago and New York in the United States of America.

In this era I was the Treasurer of the [Fly Fishers' Club of Tasmania](#) for a number of years, enjoying the friendship of the members. Subsequently I formed the Tasmanian Firearms Owners Committee, who were people who wanted to do the right thing, but needed a combined voice. I was their first President.

By now I had passed my accountancy exams, and was organizing classes, and teaching at night for the Bankers' Institute, the Insurance Institute, and privately. I mainly taught elementary accounting and became a registered Tax Agent and Company Auditor. I am currently a Tax Agent, having been so for thirty years, also an Auditor for about eight different clubs and societies. I was appointed an examiner in accounting for the Bankers' Institute of Australasia. I served for a number of years as a Board Member of the Parkside Matriculation Students' Hostel in Launceston.

In early 1965 the bank asked me to vet all new staff as to their I.Q. I felt rather diffident about this as I hadn't been tested myself, so presented myself to the branch of psychology in the Education Department, who tested me and suggested I should apply to [Mensa](#). This I did and was tested and accepted on July the 5th 1965, my birthday. I became State Secretary for a number of years and then was elected National Chairman. This post I held for four terms, resigning after my workload at home became too large.

During this era I wrote a book on Fly-Fishing in Tasmania named "Tasmanian Angler". I wrote all the text and took the photographs, but was doubtful as to the syntax so approached an angling author I knew, David Scholes, to help me produce the book. He suggested he change it into the third person, which he did. It was subsequently published in a thousand copies and is now selling currently for one thousand and fifty dollars. This copy was sold at an auction in Melbourne. Makes me wonder a bit as I sold them for \$5.60!

Also I had become Treasurer of the Launceston Creche Committee. A position I held for twelve years, being made an Honorary Life member when I resigned. Also, at this time, the Bankers' Institute conferred on me the status of Fellow and Honorary Life Member. I was also the front-of-house manager for the Launceston Players, a theatrical group. I took this job over from my father-in-law, who wished to retire.

I devised a system of bank marketing research, which I promoted overseas.

Fly-fishing has been my main hobby or semi sport activity, however I did play Australian Rules football with the City Club in Launceston, and 'A' grade cricket with the George Town Cricket Club. I also played football with the Old Boys' team from Grammar, "The Old Launcestonians"

At this time I won an advertising raffle, the prize to Hong Kong and back via New Guinea and Manila. Needless to say my wife and I enjoyed the holiday of ten days.

Now, I caught the political bug and became the Treasurer of Bass, the northern electorate. I was nominated for the Senate by the Liberal Party and was No. 5 on a ticket of six in the [1974 double dissolution election](#). I gained more first preference votes (4,419) than one of the three sitting Liberal senators and the candidate in position No. 4 on the ticket, but failed to be elected. I was the last candidate to be excluded, as I remained in the count until the 29th of the 30 stages of the count, when the continuing candidates had been reduced to just me and the candidate in position No. 4, but it was he that filled the final vacancy. This really scorched me, so I started to look around. In the meantime I applied again for Senate nomination, but failed as the Party had regional rules, which excluded me. [Max Bingham](#), the Leader of the Opposition in Tasmania, suggested to me that I apply for State selection for the State Parliament. I did, and was the [third of the four Liberals elected in Bass](#) on the 11th December 1976. We were in Opposition.

I had spent a large amount of time "door knocking" in my campaigning to gain a seat, but soon realized that survival was the name of the game. I door knocked solidly for approximately three years, and at the next election, in [July 1979](#), I topped the poll for all candidates with 10,700 votes. However we were still in Opposition so, back

to door knocking, and in the subsequent three years I went to approximately 12,000 homes. At the next election, in [May 1982](#), I topped the poll again for all candidates, with 12,103 votes, and became a Minister of the Crown and an Executive Councillor. I am still an Executive Councillor.

My responsibilities included Industry, Small Business, Inland Fisheries, Consumer Affairs, the Government Insurance Office, the Motor Accidents Board, the [Electoral Office](#), the Salamanca Trust, and the Tasmanian Film Corporation. After a couple of years, I gave up Industry and the Salamanca Trust, acquiring in their place Housing, Sport and Recreation.

I was elected an Honorary Fellow of the Marketing Institute on the 8th March 1983.

Prior to all this I had been working on a Private Member's Bill to try to bring fairness as to how the names were placed on the ballot paper. From the beginning of the [Hare-Clark electoral system](#), the surnames were in alphabetical order, hence when I entered Parliament the majority of members' surnames started with the letters, A, B, C, D. e.g. Amos, Aulich, Beattie (2), Bonney, Bingham, Braid (2), Baker, Baldock, and so on. I had many arguments with the members on my own side. After I won these arguments, I was allowed to bring in a private member's Bill, which in essence allowed every candidate at an election to have 1/7th or 1/5th of papers printed, with their names at No. 1, No. 2, No. 6 or No. 7 position depending on the number in a column.

All this was while we were in Opposition. [Billy Neilson](#), the Labor Premier, stalled these proceedings for well over a year, and then [Doug Lowe](#) became Premier. Also, the names on ballot papers had been changed to being by lot, through a remnant from a previous Act, and guess who won No.1 position on the party column at the July 1979 election, which was the second of [the only two elections held](#) where surnames were in one fixed order, by lot, down the column? ... ME ... rather poetic justice I thought.

Time went by and the Labor party had a conference on the west coast and they found to their horror that the unionists had ganged up on their members of Parliament and that they were going to decide the order on the ballot paper. The Tuesday afterwards, I was asked by Doug Lowe to present my Private Member's Bill, and needless to say it passed without one member dissenting. The previous week I was called a "mad professor"; this week I became "a man of vision". [Peter Hodgman](#) took the Bill in the Upper House and it passed again without dissent in November 1979. Now, it is called [Robson Rotation](#), and is used in the Lower House, the Upper House and all municipal councils in [Tasmania](#).

I campaigned twice for Robson Rotation for the [Legislative Assembly in the Australian Capital Territory](#), and I was very pleased when it was accepted in a referendum there. The people of the ACT later entrenched Robson Rotation in their law by a second referendum

In 2001, I visited the [Victorian Constitution Commission](#) and talked to its three Commissioners about our Electoral System. Since then, they brought out a report, which recommended a proportional representation system, for use for their Upper House, and that has now been implemented. Their report also [commends Robson Rotation](#) for possible future use. I am a member of the [Proportional Representation Society of Australia](#), which sponsored my visit to the Victorian Constitution Commission.

Behind the scenes, I had been working on a Bill to form a new government department, which was to be the marketing arm of government. It was highly secret as it had been tried before, but interested parties had got to hear of the previous one, and blocked its progress, and in the end scuttled it. Our Bill went through and the department was named the Tasmanian Development Authority, TDA. It is now called the Department of State Development.

A promise I had made in my election campaign was to help anglers who were willing to work for our wonderful fishery. The Government backed anglers' efforts on a dollar-for-dollar basis through which four boat ramps were constructed in the highland lakes area.

During my time as Minister, I went overseas twice. To Davos in Switzerland twice, for business conferences and the promotion of Tasmania, to England twice re fisheries and Forestry matters on behalf of the Premier. To Japan

and Hong Kong. Promoting Tasmania. To California and Alabama, again promoting Tasmania. To Germany re a proposed submarine manufacturing base in Tasmania.

On one trip to Davos I brought back the names of forty venture capitalists who wanted Tasmanians to join them in a business venture. The forty names and their type of business were advertised in our local papers seeking local participants. The result was, in the main, threatening letters from local businesses saying they would leave the State if I persisted. Not long after this through ancillary efforts by me, four Chinese businessmen from Hong Kong came to the State and were looked after by my Department of Industry. They were toy manufacturers. The final result was they admired our State, liked our climate etc, but were frightened off by their worries over our unions.

Some Swiss watchmakers showed interest, but the possibilities of markets worried them so they in the end said no. I was successful with Skellerup, a New Zealand firm, who made outdoor clothes. After a great deal of wooing they eventually established in George Town, but lasted only for about five years, their problem, like many, a small market in Tasmania, and the transport costs etc. to large markets.

The Governor of Tasmania, [Sir James Plimsoll](#), helped me a great deal. He used to have me out to Government House to meet the various Ambassadors, and Trade Commissioners where we both "worked on them". He was very skilled as he used to be in the Diplomatic Corps. I semi-blotted my copybook at one luncheon, when I asked the Saudi Ambassador "How he was progressing with the vote for women in his country?"

I was appointed a Commissioner for State Sinking Funds; a job I liked as it took me back to the Bank. I was a Fellow of the Taxation Institute for a number of years.

On the nomination of Hon. [Michael Field](#) M.H.A, Labor Premier of Tasmania, to the Governor that I be granted permission to retain the title "Honourable" for life: it was granted on the 13th December 1990 by the Governor of Tasmania, His Excellency [Sir Philip Bennett](#).

Some of the attacks by the Opposition during my Ministry left a deep impression on me, not for the attacks themselves, but through their obvious ignorance on the ways of business and the time factors involved. Also adversarial politics in my opinion is a complete waste of time, a sop for the press and allows the attacker to hinder and impede Ministers who are trying hard to advance the State for the benefit of all.

After six hard years' hard campaigning, two and a half years as a Minister, I was physically burnt out, so offered my resignation to the Premier in September 1984. After acceptance, I returned to the back bench where I resumed my duties as Chairman of the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee, the State's Auditing Committee, where I established a record of eleven years in this position, together with being appointed as Chairman of two inquiries, one on land management in the highlands, and one on our trout fishery.

For a while, I represented Tasmania on the Federal Government's EPAC committee, The Economic Planning and Advisory body.

Now I took up the cause of the people again by combining with Professor Walker from Queensland University to prepare a Bill on Citizens Initiated Referenda for Tasmania. I worked on this for approximately two years, most of this time being wasted by the Greens, who said they wanted to help me but continually "put broken spokes in the wheel." After about eighteen months of stalling and subterfuge, I became sick of it all and put the Bill before the House. All the Liberals supported the Bill, but the lack of the Green vote downed it. Just before my voluntary retirement from the House of Assembly, I handed this Bill over to Ron Cornish, who showed interest in it. Remember that the Liberals had supported it when in Opposition and now they were in Government, so I hopefully asked [Ron Cornish](#), who was now the Attorney-General to put it up to the Liberal Cabinet. The result was they didn't support this democratic Bill, which rocked me. No wonder they only have seven members of Parliament now. Also the Liberal Party in Bass had supported this principle being added to the State Platform, but when a party supporter from Bass suggested the Parliamentary Liberal Party should be chastised for this gutless turnaround, they supported the Parliamentary Party in their back-down at a special resolution to the Bass Party Members. Again, no wonder they have only seven parliamentary members.

Just before my retirement, I became aware that [Christine Milne](#), the leader of the Greens, went on Hobart radio, and said that she supported Citizens Initiated Referenda. What a queer way to support it by voting against my Bill, without trying to amend it, if they were unhappy with this particular Bill.

The Bribery Commission came and went much to the detriment of members in general. Poor advice in general influenced me not to take out a defamation suit on particular parts of the printed media. For other reasons I contacted the Press Council about another media dignitary. They advised me that I had a good case, but before proceeding they wished me to waive my rights against this particular person. I thought they were joking, but not so?

Talking about media personalities, I had one tell a friend of mine that he made and broke politicians. A good reason to take up door knocking! Once I spent eleven days door knocking from Zeehan to Deloraine. This was in my holidays, and re my Senate bid.

In leaving Parliament, I realized I admired most of the Public Service Staff, despised some Members of Parliament, and admired others such as the Hon. Dr [David Crean](#) MLC, who I believe will be seen as a good Treasurer, so much so he is the only Labor member I ever door knocked for.

At this time I completed a very informal interview with a Dr Judith Homeshaw from the Tasmanian University on the history of Robson Rotation. This has lately been taken up by the Commonwealth Oral Museum in Canberra, who have made this interview a subject of a Compact Disc, for which I granted a licence to use as they saw fit.

In about 1989 I formed the first Branch of Trout Unlimited in Australia, at Launceston. It is still thriving, and caters for anglers and supporters who wish to put a bit back into our marvellous Trout Fishery. At the moment, we are cleaning up riverbanks, by eradicating crack willows. At our annual dinner and meeting last Saturday, I was told officially that I had been nominated to the Angling Hall of Fame in Tasmania. Of course this is a nomination only, I have to be accepted

Since retiring in 1992, I have spent three years as the Inaugural Chairman of Adult Education, Audit Chairman of TAFE Tasmania for three years and have been a Director of the Port of Launceston for five years. A few months ago I was appointed to the Tasmanian regional board of the Taxpayers of Australia, resigning in August 2005. About four years ago I wrote a small booklet for Club Secretaries and Treasurers.

Appointed a Commissioner for Declarations in 1992.

Awarded a Centenary Medal for Electoral Reform, especially Robson Rotation on ballot papers, in December 2002. Also wrote the booklet *Everybody Counts*, which explains in a simple manner how Hare-Clark with Robson Rotation works. The booklet was launched on the 23rd. March 2004, in Parliament House, Hobart.

I have always loved fly-fishing, and have just written another book, called "[Tails of a Tasmanian Angler](#)", anecdotal stories compiled from over the years. The book was launched by my old friend Charles Wooley at Petrarchs book shop in Launceston on the 26th. August 2005. In the winter months when the trout fishing season is out, I spend time near the mouth of the Tamar River, where I fish for salt water fish. Some time ago, I sat for and passed my speedboat licence test.

Appointed as a [Member](#) in the General Division of the Order Of Australia on Australia Day, 26th January 2007. The Citation for the honour read "For Service to Electoral Reform through the voting system, to the Parliament of Tasmania, and to fishing and community organisations".