

Following his political career, John Button continued to be active in the community. He served as chairman of the Melbourne Writers Festival, and his books and other writings are a significant contribution to the political history of this country. A Geelong tragic, his involvement with and lifelong passion for the Geelong Football Club is widely known. John Button was also a man whose character embodied those Aussie values of good humour, irreverence to authority and larrikinism. He was a man of great wit and a prankster. Describing Tim Fischer, he wrote, 'He spoke a strange language, a type of Albury Afrikaans.' And for years John Button would pen illiterate letters under his pseudonym, Arthur Cartwright, peppering Labor colleagues and public figures with acerbic advice. He also once wrote, 'I admired Gough Whitlam but not as much as he did.'

John Button was a great Australian: a reformer and a creative policymaker. He was respected and he was well liked right across the political divide. He was a thoroughly decent man and a man of wit and grace. He was someone who added to the general public esteem for government, for parliament and for politicians generally. He was a giant of the Labor movement and should be honoured as such. He also endured what we as parents fear most, and that was the loss of a son under the most tragic circumstances. To his partner of 10 years, Joan Grant, his sons, James and Nick, and his grandchildren, Harry, Lola and Otis, I extend the deepest sympathies of the opposition and the Liberal Party of Australia.

Mr KATTER (Kennedy) (2.21 pm)—I am a very great admirer of John Button and, as a person who has spent an awful lot of money on steel in my lifetime, I do not think I could leave without putting on the public record exactly what John Button did in the steel industry—he and John Prescott. The Australian steel industry produced 80 tonnes per man per year at the same time as Kaochin plant was producing 600 tonne per man per year. His program, along with that of John Prescott, the head of BHP, led the Australian steel industry to move from 80 tonnes per man not to 600 tonnes per man, which was the international benchmark, but to 720 tonnes per man per year, which was the most efficient steel industry in the world.

I have to disagree with the leaders when they say he was a great champion of deregulation, because he had done that by a \$360 million subsidy. He was a clever fellow because he had actually promised \$780 million on condition that BHP put in \$1,500 million. They ended up putting in \$1,800 million but the federal government put in \$386 million. He was responsible very much for discussions with the unions—and there was deregulation as far as that went—that enabled this industry to become the most competitive industry on earth. What a great monument to leave to the Australian people. In the car industry it was a desperate fight

against, from where I sat, deregulation and the removal of tariffs to the circular arrangements in the car industry—and I do not wish to discuss that today—that preserved that industry and fought off its demolition for some 10 or 15 years.

My last memory of John Button was when I ran into him in the street in Melbourne. I said, 'You rescued the Australian car industry, you rendered the Australian steel industry internationally competitive and you were sacked for your achievements,' and he roared laughing. I said, 'Can we have lunch some time?' and, roaring with laughter still, he said, 'Love to.'

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.~~

40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLES OF FIRE SUPPORT BASES CORAL AND BALMORAL

Mr RUDD (Griffith—Prime Minister) (2.24 pm)—I seek indulgence to make a statement on the 40th anniversary of the Battles of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral from the Vietnam War. Forty years ago today on 13 May 1968 Australian soldiers in the South Vietnamese province of Bien Hoa were coming to grips with the first engagements of what would become known as the Battles of Fire Support Bases Coral and Balmoral.

The Australian forces had only deployed to their new positions late on 12 May. Their defences were still unfinished when the first contacts were made in the early hours of 13 May. When the North Vietnamese army attacked in the vicinity of a mortar platoon and a gun battery at 3.30 am the battle began in earnest. The first night was a harrowing experience for the soldiers fighting against overwhelming numbers of enemy, fighting in the flare and trace of darkness, fighting a bloody engagement that left 11 Australians dead. We do not know how many North Vietnamese army soldiers died although they left 52 dead scattered around the base.

In the morning one soldier recalled looking around and seeing that everyone was covered in grey mud. There was a strong smell of cordite and gunpowder. It was an opening action in which our troops in the words of one senior officer, 'Performed with steadiness and bravery second to none.' The battle that started that night ebbed and flowed for nearly four weeks. That is an extraordinarily long military engagement. Our troops—including tank and APC crews, air crews, artillery, infantry and support troops—defended their positions against repeated attacks. They patrolled into areas held tight by the North Vietnamese army and in the end they prevailed. The North Vietnamese army was forced