

**ED CASEY:  
THE MAN, THE MEMBER, THE MINISTER**

A Memoir

*2 October 2007*

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On Saturday, March 18, 1995, Queensland's Minister for Primary Industries and Fisheries, Edmund Denis Casey, then 62, woke at his usual time, about 4 a.m., in his home at 1 Henderson Street, East Mackay. After listening to the radio news and reading the paper - his usual routine - Ed Casey, a diabetic since he was about 30, prepared for yet another strenuous weekend.

He and wife Laurie were due to leave Mackay around 9 a.m. that day by commercial flight for Brisbane where they would board the government plane to keep ministerial appointments at Roma.

When he began dressing at 7 a.m. he told Laurie he did not feel well. He asked her to help him put on his shoes. She went to put a sock on his right foot and remembers having said, 'Oh, I know why you are not well. Your foot is swollen and dark looking'.

That was the beginning of the end of his very active five years and seven months as minister, during which he successfully undertook the monumental task of deregulating the sugar industry, and of his 26 years representing the Mackay electorate in the Queensland Legislative Assembly (Queensland has only the one house of Parliament).

It was not the end of what the city council-sponsored history of Mackay described, accurately, as a remarkable career. On reflection 'remarkable' could be an understatement.

Doctors were quickly consulted and Ed was told that he had no choice. He was suffering from gangrene and it was his leg or his life. He was given a maximum of 72 hours to think about it.

Ed and Laurie needed little more than a few minutes. His private secretary and confidante, Malcolm Macmillan (later chief - of - staff to deputy premier Tom Burns) was phoned in Brisbane, the Roma trip was cancelled, and arrangements were made for an immediate amputation.

Surgery was under way within a few hours in Mackay's Mater Hospital, (then in Gordon Street and now at North Mackay) and Ed's right leg was successfully amputated just below the knee.

Mackay's then latest orthopaedic surgeon, Coady Fitzgerald, afterwards said his first job on arrival in Mackay was to take off the minister's leg!

That night at Mass at St Patrick's, River Street, (not Ed's parish church; all his life, his Parish was St Mary's, Juliet Street, South Mackay) a friend told me that she had heard of the amputation.

I was shocked by the information. As I recall, after Mass, with difficulty, I obtained Ed's hospital room number. I found his door ajar and the room in darkness; I entered and

had a few words with him. In a feeble voice he confirmed the surgery and said he had not yet seen his wife. I quickly apologised for my having disturbed him and left.

What followed amazed me and showed, yet again, the true measure of the man.

About 8 o'clock the following morning my wife, Win, answered the phone. It was Ed Casey, who in a soft, feeble voice asked for me. When I came on the phone, unbelievably, he apologised for not having been able to speak to me the previous night, repeating that even Laurie had not then seen him. An amazing man.

The Casey family story in several aspects was typical of the life of many Catholics in Australia from perhaps 1900 until, in Mackay, the late 1960s.

Major community changes started then with the advent of television and the beginning of the new, giant coal-mining industry in the Bowen Basin that established new towns in the Mackay hinterland. The coal from nine mines fed into what is now the world's biggest coal exporting complex at Hay Point and Dalrymple Bay, about 40 kilometres south of Mackay.

For the Casey family and other parishioners, the earlier years meant struggling to get a new parish under way, fund raising fetes and euchre parties, building schools with little or no government assistance, battling for so-called state aid for church schools, finding money for a church and the support of priests.

In a regional urban setting, there is a touch of the Catholicism depicted, if slightly idealised, in the delightful poems by John O'Brien (Monsignor Patrick Joseph Hartigan) of *Around the Boree Log* fame.

Ed Casey's sense of community service, which deepened as he aged, came from a strong family base, described at his death by then Premier Peter Beattie as conservative Irish Catholic. This background played a key part in nurturing the sense of loyalty and service which were key factors in Ed's nearly 60 years of public life, beginning as a schoolboy when he accepted a request from his principal, Br J.V. Riley, of St Patrick's Christian Brothers College, to be a member of a public committee advising on adult education.

A few years later, when we were teenagers - I was a bit younger than Ed - he told me he was interested in a career in politics.

Eventually, his goal became the Premiership of Queensland, to which he came close; but great hurdles, many of which he overcame, always cheerfully, were in his path. Some were placed there deliberately by people of influence in his own party, the Australian Labor Party.

Ed Casey was born in Mackay on January 2, 1933, the youngest of three sons and a daughter of John Patrick Casey and Grace (nee Robinson), both Catholics and members of St Mary's Parish.

The attractive brick church was opened three years later by the Bishop of Rockhampton, Romuald Hayes, in whose diocese the parish was situated. The Casey family maintained a friendly association with Bishop Hayes.

Ed Casey's paternal grandparents were Irish-born and his mother had an Irish background. Ed was always committedly aware, and proud of, the Irish Catholic heritage.

His father was one of Mackay's best-known citizens, with long service to the Australian Labor Party and as an alderman of Mackay City Council and member of several statutory bodies.

John Patrick Casey was active in the St Vincent de Paul Society, the Hibernians (he declined the national presidency of the Hibernians because of travel and other difficulties during World War 11), the Knights of the Southern Cross and in other parish, charitable and sporting bodies, and was president of Mackay Rugby League for what was then thought to be a record 21 years. At his death at 57 in 1959, a son, Vince, succeeded him as league president.

The Caseys were related to the pioneering Ready family and Mrs Mary Ready, from Tipperary, who came to the Mackay district in the early 1860s, was the first white woman to settle in the area. It was 12 months before she saw another white woman. A Ready was later mayor of Mackay.

The Readys sponsored Casey cousins (two brothers, one Ed's grandfather, John) to Australia from Ireland. Ed's uncle Vince Robinson, was the companion and unofficial secretary

for pioneering French priest Fr Pierre Marie Bucas, (after whom the growing seaside community, Bucasia, is named). Vince Robinson settled in France with a French bride after World War 1 service in the AIF; he and his wife were passengers on one of the last refugee boats to leave northern France for England when the Germans invaded in 1940.

Ed's parents, Jack and Grace Casey, had a profound influence on him. Grace, before her marriage, had been a school teacher and the family conducted an earth moving and carrying business. Both parents had a strong social conscience and were champions of the underdog.

In later life Ed was to write:

Politics, religion and football have played a major role in the Casey family tradition.

The family was by tradition Labor, Catholic, and passionate about rugby league. My very first memories as a three to four-year old were of sitting on a little hand-made bush stool at family gatherings at my grandfather's property, Yellow Waterholes, [a cattle property], on the Walkerston-Eton Road in the days when little boys were seen and not heard, while my grandfather, father and uncles discussed the current events of all three.

My mother and aunts, all great cooks, would be out the back in the older building clearing away after lunch, and talking about the children, and starting to prepare for afternoon tea.

It was a typical Irish Catholic family scene of the hard and harsh times of the 1930s with the Great Depression still running.

I guess my own faith, political principles, and love for football were being shaped as I listened intently to those discussions and the yarns of earlier days and the way in which the family had met the hardships, sorrows, and adversities of earlier times, and moved on to establish itself as a loving, caring family and a part in the history of the development of the Mackay region and helped to establish a record of community service that my generation would find necessary to follow.

My concentration would only be distracted by the call of 'smoko' from Aunty Mary and everyone moved immediately to the kitchen building to partake of fresh hot scones and all the other goodies prepared by the women of the family.

There is no doubt about it, families are a great institution.

A strong family theme ran through Ed's life. Grace Casey has left a valuable written snapshot of the development of the family's parish, St Mary's, which includes accounts of fund raising, primitive accommodation for the first parish priest, Father (later Monsignor) Thomas Byrne from Cork, Ireland, and his assistant, Father Edmond Fraher from Tipperary, the construction of tennis courts, extensions to school buildings, and the building of the church and presbytery. The Casey trucks and equipment combined with their generous volunteer work, played a vital role in this growth.

The 1930s were tough years, and impacted on Ed, his brothers and sister. Mrs Casey wrote (in part):

In the 1930s we experienced a big depression. It, and drought, brought disaster to men in all walks of life, professionals as well as labourers.

Men had to tramp from town to town trying to exist on very meager rations, hardly enough to keep body and soul together.

It was a pitiful sight to see hopeless-looking men, women and children rummaging in rubbish bins and dumps to see if they could find any specked [damaged] fruit or vegetables.

Butchers would put out bags of bones with plenty of meat and the trimmings off the end of joints. Bakers would put out stale bread and buns and current loaves.

...the men were a decent lot and would share with their companions in misfortune. Only the rougher element would try to grab the lot and not all the shopkeepers were willing to help them out either...in the meantime we were working hard to reduce our [parish] debt.

Because of high Catholic morale and a fairly strong sense of social cohesion in those years, despite the depression, the church carried out an extensive building program in Mackay and elsewhere that benefited the community.

Ed attended St Mary's convent school (Sisters of Mercy), St Patrick's Christian Brothers College (his father had been a member of the committee that planned the college) and completed years 11 and 12 (then called Senior) at Mackay State High School, where he was a prefect and house captain.



His leadership qualities already were evident. He was a life-long supporter of the three schools.

At 16 Ed joined the local ALP branch and succeeded his father as president on his father's death in 1959, when Ed was 26 years old. As a school leaver he joined the staff of the Commonwealth Bank at Mackay.

The government of Prime Minister Robert Menzies introduced national service for 18-year-olds in 1951 and Ed trained with the army at Wacol (near Brisbane) in that first year – establishing another life-long interest, the military.

After Wacol training Ed served 10 years in the army reserve, successfully studied for a commission, became lieutenant in 1955 and captain in 1958. In that year he was one of only five Australian officers chosen for a study tour of South East Asia, primarily focusing on Malaysia where the 'Emergency', introduced in 1948, still had two years to run.

Ed loved sport, particularly rugby league and cricket, but also basketball and tennis. He enjoyed gardening and reading, and had a particular interest in local history, spending a lot of time researching aspects of the history of the Pioneer River which runs through the Mackay district.

According to historian Dr Kett Kennedy, Ed's four years as an A grade rugby league player, a solidly built front-row forward, for Bucas, (now Brothers), and Carlton clubs, and reaching city representative standard, taught Ed never to take a backward step. Kett Kennedy thought military training enhanced his natural agility of mind.

Ed Casey told me that an experience at Wacol when he was only 18 taught him that people cannot be relied upon to take courageous stands. He carried this knowledge with him throughout his life.

On leaving school Ed became an active member of the Catholic youth group, YCW (Young Christian Workers). Through the YCW he met a member of the equivalent girls' group, the NCGM (National Catholic Girls Movement), Laurette Reeves, (always known as Laurie), one of three girls and a boy, children of police Sergeant Norm Reeves and wife Irene.

Ed and Laurie would often meet in the city where Laurie handled the banking for Pennys department store. They loved dancing and it did not take much for Ed to break into song. Somebody said Ed was one of the few in Australia who knew every verse of *The Wild Colonial Boy*. Love blossomed and lasted. They were married in St Mary's in 1955 by Fr M.F.J. (Frank) Quinn and raised a family of six children.

They lived in the one house all their lives, fewer than 100 metres from Ed's parents' home and built for them by the same firm, Guthries, that built their parish church and many other significant city buildings. Ed's sister eventually lived across the road and a brother next door. It was family all the way. In that home Ed and Laurie celebrated their golden wedding anniversary a year before his death with a party and a blessing from the Pope.

Their children's names point, positively, to the era and religion: Patrick, Terence, Francis, Jack (Edmund John), Brendan and Bernadette.

Laurie and the children were to remain Ed's most powerful support group until the day he died. In a eulogy at his Requiem Mass his secretary, Malcolm Macmillan, said a certain constant, a certain continuity in Ed's life, could be summed up in three wonderful words, Laurette Norma Casey, affectionately called Laurie. This was a striking tribute to Ed's wife.

In 1957 the great Labor split came to Queensland. Its causes are beyond the scope of this paper, but the ALP which had governed Queensland since 1915 (except for a gap from 1929-1932) was split in a savage internal war.

As a result, Country Party (later National Party) leader Frank Nicklin, who had lost five consecutive elections and seemed set to lose another, became Premier, and the ALP went into opposition for 32 years. Joh Bjelke-Petersen, who was to become a fierce opponent of Ed's, was premier for 19 of those years.

Two Labor parties emerged from the split, the ALP and the Queensland Labor Party (QLP), which eventually merged with the Democratic Labor Party. The split caused deep, often bitter divisions in the community. The divisions were felt intensely in the Catholic Church. In Mackay, considerable controversy focused on Ed's father rather than on the 24-year-old Ed.

Ed was invited to join the QLP. He consulted his father who, reportedly, said, 'There's only one true church.' Ed, with the rest of his immediate family, remained with the ALP.

Malcolm Macmillan believes that as a result of the rigours of that experience Ed developed a certain toughness that was perfectly blended and balanced with genuine care and compassion for others. Ed was good at blending and balancing.

In later years when waging an election campaign, a relative who had supported the QLP offered him financial assistance, an indication that despite strong political differences, many personal relationships survived the split. Ed told me on one occasion, 'Nobody will find my claw marks on his back'. I think he was right.

Communism was a major issue, I believe rightly, in those decades. Ed was very anti-communist.

He left the bank after about three years and joined the family business, even then, I believe, with his eye on the Mackay seat – a seat Labor to its bootstraps - according to *Courier-Mail* journalist Peter Morley (*Courier Mail* 14/6/95). He widened his community interests in the course of which he became, at 29, the youngest Rotary Club president in Australia.

In 1965 he narrowly failed to gain a seat on the Mackay City Council. Three years later he was elected to the council with a record vote in a team led by Ian Wood, a long-serving Liberal Senator and old political opponent of his father, but with whom Ed worked comfortably.

Appointment to the Harbour Board (now the Port Authority) that controlled Mackay's harbour from which the district's raw sugar was exported, followed. Ed became heavily involved in the municipal and political life of Mackay and, to a considerable extent, the political life of Queensland. In 1969 Mr Fred Graham, who had held the Mackay seat for the ALP for 27 years, retired undefeated after winning 10 elections.

Ed, who had earlier alienated Trades Hall boss Jack Egerton, - not a wise move for an eager young politician - sought ALP nomination for the seat but was rejected, apparently on the pretext he was too close to anti-Labor aldermen in the Mackay City Council and to QLP members. QLP leader, former premier, and later senator, Vince Gair's name was also mentioned by Ed's critics.

Ed successfully appealed the refusal and, this hurdle overcome, easily won the plebiscite for nomination, then won the seat, retiring undefeated 26 years later. Retiring undefeated has been traditional for holders of the Mackay seat.

William Forgan Smith won it for the ALP in 1915, only four years after he arrived in the district from Scotland at the age of 24, and retired undefeated 27 years later (his portfolios included agriculture and, for 10 years, the premiership).

Mr Tim Mulherin now holds the seat, as is customary, with a big margin, as is customary, for the ALP, and as has also become customary, is Minister for Primary Industries. As did Ed, he too attended St Mary's convent school and St

Patrick's College; he has an Irish background and his wife, Erin, is Irish born and educated.

As a parliamentarian Ed took a keen interest in all primary industries. Shortly after he entered parliament I travelled with him and others by car from Mackay to Longreach, at times on dusty back roads. Much of the country was just bush or pasture lands to the rest of us but not to Ed. He seemed to know where we were, the shire boundaries and, often, who was shire chairman.

His interest in sugar, an industry that has decentralised Queensland and which until recent times underpinned the Mackay economy, was almost obsessive. When the opportunity arrived he was to revolutionise the administration of the industry.

The busy life of an energetic and ambitious member followed his entry to parliament. He did an enormous amount of what could be termed social work, and found out that his predecessor, Mr Fred Graham, had done similarly.

Ed strongly supported equal opportunities for women. He opposed abortion and became a vice-president of Right to Life in Mackay. He was opposed to the legalising of brothels.

I recall the reply of a budding parliamentarian who was advised to associate himself with community and sporting bodies: I tried that, but everywhere I went Ed Casey had been there before me!

He was patron of numerous clubs but did not enjoy club life (apart from Rotary) and did not play bowls or golf, sports with a strong social component. A shrewd politician, and out of conviction, Ed worked for the whole community.

Obviously, because of his definite, perhaps inflexible, political views, he made enemies. Laurie says backbiting and jealousy did not unduly disturb him. He slept well and could catnap.

A friendly associate and admirer for 20 years, Mr Frank Gilbert, manager of Mackay Communities, said Ed rapidly took control of any meeting and summed up situations very quickly. I think his self-confident, outgoing manner, and ready laugh, won him many friends but antagonised his opponents.

Abstemious in his habits, he enjoyed an occasional brandy and a cigar, and his singsong nights around the piano with fellow parliamentarians of all political persuasions, particularly at the parliamentary Christmas party, are legendary. They paid for it the next day.

Former Queensland governor Mrs Lineen Forde, in the course of a warm tribute at the time of his death, referred to his wonderful singing voice and said:

He was a regular invitee to our St Patrick's Day dinners in the big white house on the hill at Bardon [Government House] where he entertained us, our other guests and the staff, with Irish ditties, a lilt in his voice and a mischievous twinkle in his eye. I don't think the house ever heard anything like it before or since.

Ed appreciated and reciprocated the goodwill of members of other religious denominations and none, including many who disagreed with him politically. This stood him in good stead when he faced yet another major hurdle thrown up by the administrative section of his party.

As the 1972 state election approached he naturally expected ALP re-endorsement, considering his clear win at his first election – he had an overall majority, winning 58.73 per cent of the vote. His supporters were shocked and others surprised and puzzled when party officials with strong Trades Hall backing - it is said Mr Egerton's work - struck. The Labor in Politics Convention, by ballot, refused to re-endorse him (many who voted against him did not know him; they obviously were voting under instructions)

There could be no appeal this time.

This strike at Ed was part of a purge of three right-wingers (the other two were Mr Colin Bennett, South Brisbane, and Mr H Thackeray, Rockhampton North) in which personal hatred and anti-Catholic sectarianism played a major part. One Trades Hall official told Ed that he was under suspicion because he was often seen talking earnestly to another couple of Catholic members. He was told it was believed they were discussing Catholic Action.

At a time of Cold War tensions, the fight against communism, and fears of a third world war, a view was held by those who favour conspiracy-type thinking (an erroneous view I believe) that the Catholic Church, or sections of it, in combating communism, was trying to control the Labor Party.



I was dining with friends (it was a Saturday night) when the news of the move against Ed spread.

I spoke to Ed the following night, Sunday, January 30, 1972. He was very disappointed but not crestfallen. He was critical of the procedure (since changed) and people who had dealt him this severe blow. He thought a certain element in the party was happy for Labor to stay in opposition, from which they exercised considerable personal control, which would be denied them were the ALP to be in government.

Former Premier Peter Beattie, referring to Labor's 32 years in opposition, (*Courier-Mail* 18/5/07) said much the same thing. After referring to poor-quality candidates and incompetence, he said Labor had shown no commitment to "anything other than our own self-interest."

And as for the Bjelke-Petersen years, journalist Mike Steketee, writing in the Book Review supplement of *The Australian* newspaper (4/7/2007) said the Fitzgerald Royal Commission found the conservative Government was more crooked than a Queensland blue heeler's hind leg. Investigative journalist Phil Dickie wrote (*Courier Mail* 17/5/2007), 'The Bjelke-Petersen Government was arrogant, secretive and dismissive of democracy'.

[I make a personal comment here: in a long career as a regional daily newspaper journalist I found, in the main, Labor and anti-Labor politicians more hard working than the public is aware, and committed to the public interest].

After the severe blow referred to above, Ed made no immediate public comment on his future but told me confidentially he considered standing as an independent. I told him independents had a low success rate. He said that depended on the circumstances.

He had correctly judged the circumstances. Weighing up the chances of success for his opponent, a young shire councilor endorsed in his place by the ALP - a man Ed had helped to gain public notice - Ed decided that if Mackay was not to be lost to Labor, he must stand as an Independent Labor candidate.

He resigned from the party (he was not expelled) and won the seat, with a huge leakage of ALP preferences. He had leapt another major hurdle but the ALP was still in the political wilderness, even more divided, and Ed was in a small wilderness of his own. The next five years were hard going, with few resources.

But Laurie says he was always cheerful. She said, 'I did the worrying'. Yet she says Ed tried not to bring home the stresses and strains of political life. He wanted her to concentrate on her responsibilities of wife and mother, which she did, even managing to squeeze in 21 years as a school tuck shop volunteer.

At Parliament House Ed shared a 'broom-cupboard' office with fellow independent, the colourful Tom Aikens from the Townsville area.

As an Independent, Ed usually but not always, voted with Labor. For instance he voted with the government in support of a bill to introduce censorship of films, shouting at ALP members for opposing the legislation. He claimed that it was the responsibility of parliamentarians to ensure that films depicted normal behaviour in the community.

There was a touch of the Ed Casey informality and psychology about a 1974 prime ministerial visit to Mackay by Prime Minister Mr Gough Whitlam and wife Margaret.

In a small cavalcade from the airport to the city, the car carrying Ed and Laurie broke down. An old friend and district personality, Jim Connolly, on his way home from a trip to the city dump in his station sedan, pulled up and offered them a ride. They hopped in and continued the prime ministerial parade, with two empty rubbish bins clattering around in the back!

A year later, when Jim Connolly, a well known journalist and sports administrator (at one time he was national rugby league writer for *The Australian* newspaper) was dying at the age of 39 in a Brisbane hospital Ed, in Brisbane, was a major conduit of news of his condition to many in Mackay. Jim's widow Norma speaks feelingly of Ed's assistance to her and family at that distressing time

During the prime ministerial visit to Mackay Ed had arranged for Mr Whitlam to present a library award to St Mary's convent school and decided that the library, a rather humble facility with broken asphalt floor covered with pieces of carpet, was the appropriate venue.

For a start the Whitlams, both tall people, had to stoop to enter the room. The Prime Minister quickly became aware of his surroundings and expressed concern. He asked a member of the accompanying party to take notes. Within a short time government funds started to flow and major school improvements (including to the library) followed.

I still don't know if Mr Whitlam was aware that Ed was the school's Parents and Friends president at the time and knew exactly what he was doing, when insisting the library was the correct room for the presentation.

As time passed, the ALP seemed to be learning its lesson. Due in part to sensible persuasion by former Whitlam Government minister and Member for Dawson (centered on Mackay), Dr Rex Patterson, the three Mackay ALP branches, two unanimously, voted for Ed's readmittance to the ALP. Overtures were made to Ed by Tom Burns (well known Labor politician and later deputy premier); Ed returned to the party fold in 1977 and won the Mackay seat for the ALP.

The next year the party that had not wanted him in parliament, elected him leader. Four more tumultuous years of in-fighting and opposition followed, but the party is now adamant that Ed built bridges in those years and held the party together. He helped avert another 1957-style crash.

And, they say, his work was an important factor in Labor eventually gaining office in 1989, after the coalition-instigated Fitzgerald corruption inquiry destabilised the National Party-led government.

[Incidentally, centre-left parties such as Labor are everywhere very difficult to lead because of the wide variety of opinion in their ranks]

As leader Ed opposed large-scale street demonstrations against what his party held were bad Bjelke-Petersen government laws. One exception for Ed was Aborigines' street marches.

Gough Whitlam was a critic of Ed, claiming he did not oppose vigorously enough what he described as the Bjelke-Petersen gerrymander of state electoral boundaries, in which rural electorates had much greater voting power than urban electorates.

Ed's view: We cannot become government in Queensland on the streets. He said success would come from calm deliberation, away from emotional disturbance. Despite these views, Ed described himself to me as 'a bit of a rebel'. Tim Mulherin recalls that when Ed was opposition leader, or opposition Primary Industries spokesman, he visited country schools and sometimes, to the delight of the students, told them they could have a day off. Once when a government minister rang him and angrily wanted to know what was going on Ed said, 'Well, you tell them they can't have the holiday.'

When voted out as leader (in favour of Keith Wright), in 1982, Ed walked from the room declaring, 'The king is dead. Long live the king'. He was still very much alive politically.

With the Primary Industries portfolio in mind, perhaps as a step to the premiership, he never relaxed his study of the state's rural industries, travelling throughout Queensland by road, rather than flying, to get closer to the people and their needs.

As soon as the Goss ALP government gained office in 1989, Ed was appointed Primary Industries Minister.

With most major hurdles overcome, Ed put the restructuring of the State's scattered sugar industry, which had long been the backbone of major regions of Queensland, and which generates directly and indirectly more than 40,000 jobs, high on his priority list.

Since 1915 the sugar industry had often been described as an example of agricultural socialism (though many involved in it believed they were champions of private industry). It was strictly controlled by government and directed by many rules and regulations, considered by some to be archaic and with strangling effects.

In brief, all sugar produced was purchased by the State government for marketing, the vast amount overseas; a board decided how much cane could be crushed; farm sales were regulated etc etc.

This involved procedure had its origin in Mackay so it was ironical that a Mackay politician, in what he believed were the interests of efficiency and competition, and acting on what he considered was the best economic advice, started to unravel the system, placing emphasis on competition.

He met with strong opposition from within the industry, even within his own department, but believed a more competitive industry would obviate the necessity of the industry regularly seeking government financial help at times of low prices and drought. He thought it meant continued life for the industry. Ed had set in operation a massive, far-reaching project. It is still washing through the industry.

This move (for good or for ill) emphasized what Peter Beattie had noted about Ed: he was as tough as nails, strong willed, and had the courage of his convictions.

There's that valuable blending and balance again: the Australian and the Irish, tradition melding with forward thinking, toughness with compassion.

His successor, Tim Mulherin, believes restructuring sugar was Ed's greatest achievement. Some sectors of the sugar industry are still opposed to the new arrangements but are determined to make them work. They really have no choice.

Drought relief, flood mitigation and, always, water infrastructure were high on Ed's priority list. As minister he was a driving force behind much development in the Mackay district including a dam and new police station but what was much greater, the construction of a marina at the Mackay harbour with associated commercial advancement including the coming of high rise - one of the biggest growth spurts in Mackay's history.

The detailed planning and intricate financing of much of this development (in which local government is also heavily involved), is admirable. However I share the opinion of those who believe there are areas of this development that should have been dealt with more sensitively and in which the general public and the environment should have been better served.

I also disagreed with Ed and his party's introduction of poker machines, although apparently, some were already in operation illegally.

Ed as minister, member, and in retirement from parliament, was still an influential voice in the region and was close to the government.

A practical man with a determination to let nothing stand in his way once he had made up his mind, Ed had a greater appreciation of the built environment than the natural. He led an excellent, successful campaign that saved Mackay's old town hall (built in 1912) and which the council of the day wanted demolished to make way for a supermarket.

Incidentally, during the couple of years' reign of a Borbidge - led Coalition Government, some in Mackay feared that the new Transport Minister, the National's Mr Vaughan Johnson, (minister 26/2/1996 – 26/6/1998), who is still the Member for the big inland electorate of Gregory, would disturb the huge expansion under way at the Mackay harbour. They need not have worried. Mr Johnson made changes here and there but proved to be a co-operative minister, and free of political pettiness.



Ed travelled widely within Australia and overseas, particularly during his time as minister, but always arranged his itinerary to include Sunday Mass. I remember in 2001 looking with him at a report in an overseas newspaper dealing pessimistically with serious problems in the Catholic Church. He thought for a while then said, 'We can only pray'. He said nothing more.

In the thick of the often brutal political hurly burly, he enjoyed the cut and thrust of debate, and could hit hard. Once, when in opposition, he threw a French-made lolly across the parliament at Government members in protest at imported goods.

However on occasions people were surprised at his reluctance to condemn opponents. When his old foe, Trades Hall chief Jack Egerton, accepted a knighthood from the Fraser conservative government and left the ALP, Gough Whitlam made an unflattering comparison with Sir Toby Belch, a crude Shakespearian character. Ed's response: laughter.

Ed Casey had always opposed titles and was a republican long before it became part of the national agenda. He thought the current Australian flag inadequate. I think his republicanism owed more to his Australian identity than directly to his Irish sympathies. He accepted the Australian Government Centenary Medal as a tribute to the ALP rather than to himself. Always proper and courteous to royalty (he had met the Queen and other royal visitors), Ed associated it with snobbery and class-consciousness and thought it should not be part of the Australian scene. He wanted an Australian head-of-state.

He was a member of the Queensland Irish Association, made three visits to Ireland and blended well his Australian and Irish patriotism. On the first two visits to Ireland he tracked down his old St Mary's parish priest, Monsignor Byrne, then living in retirement in Cork. By the time of his third visit Monsignor Byrne had died but Ed located his grave beside the River Lee and also twice visited the grave, at Galbally, Tipperary, of St Mary's first curate, Fr Fraher, who had retired to his native Ireland. Both priests had given long and valued service to the Australian church in western and coastal areas. Ed was photographed standing by both graves.

The Casey family's positive attitude to, and affection for, the Irish connection resembled that of the first Australian-born, and fourth, Bishop, of the Rockhampton Diocese, Romuald Hayes (1932-45), with whom they had close contact. [The first bishop was not Irish but Italian, Bishop Giovanni Cani. The next three were Irish born. Then came Bishop Hayes who was born in Melbourne]. Bishop Hayes had an affectionate regard and respect for Ireland and welcomed Irish priests and religious to his diocese, and according to one acclaimed historian, thereby helped increase Australian priestly and religious vocations.

Ed was endorsed for the 1995 election; by this time their six children had provided him and Laurie with 10 grandchildren (more now, and great grandchildren also) - it was time to retire. He had won nine state elections, and declared he was neither a left winger nor a right winger but a Labor man.

His diabetes had worsened when he became a minister and Laurie took to accompanying him on some of his travels to watch his diet. She says he worked himself to death.

Speaking with journalist Peter Morley (*Courier-Mail* 14/6/1995), Ed said:

I have only had one political ambition: that is that the day when I die, when they lower my body into the grave, there will be somebody at that grave who is able to say that something that I had done had helped them. Everyone who has come through my office door, or who has contacted me, I have tried to treat as perhaps being that person.

The National Party's Mr Lawrence Springborg said in a parliamentary tribute at Ed's death (Hansard 9/5/2006): 'This sums up the very essence of Ed Casey and the reason he was held in such high regard in the electorate of Mackay, in this place and in other areas of Queensland'.

Liberal leader Mr Bob Quinn said Ed had made an immense contribution to Queensland.

Labor's Tom Burns said the Queensland parliament without Ed Casey would be like Townsville without Castle Hill.

Instead of sitting back and enjoying his superannuation, Ed, with an artificial leg fitted, undertook the very big job of Mackay Port Authority chairman, administering Mackay harbour and the rapidly-growing airport; campaigned for his successor Tim Mulherin (whom he first interested in standing for Parliament), He also chaired the Mackay Water Resources Commission.

He took computer lessons and still mowed his own lawn and painted rooms in his house.

Death from a stroke came on Labor Day, May 1, 2006, when Ed was 73. May 1, Tim Mulherin pointed out in a parliamentary tribute, is the feast of St Joseph the Worker. Ed's last words were to enquire how the Labor Day march had gone and, on being told it was successful, gave the thumbs up and died.

Laurie declined the Queensland Government's offer of a state funeral. The family did not seek pomp and ceremony and preferred to pay for the funeral themselves. An overflowing congregation including the Goss family, state Liberal leader Bob Quinn and other friends and foes, attended his Requiem Mass in his beloved St Mary's, on May 5, 2006. The family declined the use of the city's larger St Patrick's church. Two Mackay-born priests, Frs John Rasmussen and Stephen Hanly, were the chief concelebrants at the Requiem Mass.

As his coffin left the hearse at Mt Bassett cemetery, a piper from St Patrick's College played one of his favourites, Danny Boy, and as the coffin was lowered into the grave, The Wild Colonial Boy. The Casey's Irish crest is on his gravestone.

A message on the back of his funeral Mass card read:

ED SAID THE GREATEST MAN HE HAS EVER KNOWN WAS HIS FATHER. WE, HIS CHILDREN, BELIEVE THAT OUR FATHER, EDMUND CASEY, IS THE GREATEST MAN WE HAVE EVER KNOWN.

*Rod Manning, a retired journalist, is a Walkley Award winner (the highest award in journalism) and a former editor of 'The Daily Mercury', Mackay, Queensland.*