



PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT

Private Members Statement

12 September 2017

TRIBUTE TO NORMAN RABBETT

Ms SONIA HORNER (Wallsend) (13:05):

Too often when we talk about history, we focus on the larger-than-life figures at the expense of the day-to-day lived experiences of ordinary people. We know the names of kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers, generals and revolutionaries, but forget what life was like for those who came before us. I will take a moment to discuss one everyday bloke from my electorate. Norman Rabbett has been a resident of Wallsend for many years, and has a uniquely Australian story. To hear him tell that story is to take a tour through Australia's development as a nation. Norm was born on 24 November 1928 on the border of Queensland and New South Wales. He lived with his grandmother until he was four.

His family was impoverished, as many were and still are in the northernmost parts of New South Wales. Norm's mother married an Aboriginal man and the family moved to Gunyan Station, where Norm's stepfather found work. The Depression hit hard, and Norm remembers his family living on the riverbank near Texas in Queensland. His younger brother was born there. To ensure that his brother was not taken away by agents of the Aboriginal Protection Board, Norm remembers the family staying on the New South Wales side of the border. In 1935 Norm started school as his stepfather had found work. He was sent to Royal Far West in Sydney for 11 months when he was found to have fly-blown ears. He learnt to read, write and do arithmetic in Sydney before he returned home.

Norm worked from a young age trapping and skinning rabbits to help his stepfather feed the station's sheepdogs. Norm eventually left home and found work as a drover. He lied about his age at the outbreak of the war, saying he was in his mid-teens when he was barely 12 years old. Norm assisted the war effort by helping to maintain the supply of meat and wool. He remembers those times as days spent in the saddle and nights sleeping out under the stars. His story is uniquely Australian. During the war, Norm found work as a shearer. At that time a organiser named Jack Tanner presented him with the union books. He then assisted Mr Tanner in negotiations with a station manager 50 kilometres outside Aberdeen. Over a drink of whiskey—"rarer than gold during the war years"—Tanner, Norm and the manager hammered out a deal. This was the beginning of Norm's lifelong connection to the labour movement.

Victory against Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan came just months before his seventeenth birthday. Norm travelled to Newcastle with the name of a relative he had never met and was greeted upon arrival by a police constable who was waiting to arrest him for fare evasion—he had sneaked into the empty first class carriage for an easier ride. It was in the shearing sheds that he first became involved in the union movement, but it was in the steel mills of Newcastle that his union activism blossomed. Norm walked into Lysaght's wearing jodhpurs and a wide-brimmed hat, a country boy looking for a job in post-war Australia. He started at and left Lysaght's 11 times over 10 years, heading off to the sheds in shearing season and coming back when the season was over.

He stayed in Newcastle, worked at the ironworks and eventually built a home and a life for his family, which was a far cry from the poverty that he knew growing up. He worked hard to build a better life for himself and through his work with the unions he built a better life for all Australians. Norm joined the Federated Ironworkers' Association of Australia [FIA] staying with the union through the split of the 1950s as running battles between communists and anti-communists threatened to tear it apart. Norm was awarded life membership of the FIA and the Australian Workers' Union, which merged with the FIA in the early 1990s. Norm displays his life membership certificates with pride in his home in Wallsend, along with his life membership of the Australian Labor Party. Even though Norm is approaching 90 years of age, he keeps active around his home. Norm's stories of growing up in rural Australia during the Depression, of keeping Australia going during the war and his firsthand view of the decades of rapid change are stories to remember. We thank Norm for his contribution to Wallsend and to our community.