

*Speech by Hon. John Price AM*

*at the '200 Years of Hospital Services in Newcastle' Meeting, 11<sup>th</sup> November  
2017*

Chair - Ladies and Gentlemen

First of all I must thank you for the invitation to participate in today's significant celebration.

My brief is to reflect on the non-health industrial activity of this region that in no small part significantly influenced the political decision to accelerate the funding of several government hospital projects in the Lower Hunter.

My comments will overlap with some of the commentary of other speakers but industrial events of the early 1990's deserve a mention as well if for no other reason than to indicate how the intensity of union and public feeling and actions generally has impacted on hospital provision and location in the region.

As an Alderman of Newcastle City from 1977 and later as State Member for Waratah, I had some knowledge of the stop-start nature of major medical facility provision in the lower Hunter brought about by both population growth and the expanding requirements of the recently established Medical School at the University of Newcastle.

New Med II had been on hold for some years at the Mater site. The public could only look at the skeletal outline of the building. There was no sign of the promised cancer treatment and research facility they had been waiting for. Neither the University of Newcastle nor the Sisters of Mercy were happy.

The report commissioned by the then Minister for Health, the Hon. Laurie Brereton requested Dr Jeff Olsen as Project Manager to provide advice to the Wran Government on the future of health services development in the Hunter region with particular attention to the New Med II program.

The report was delivered early in 1982 and contained a number of recommendations including completion of New Med II, the establishment of a new hospital on the Rankin Park site at New Lambton and the closure and relocation of services of two local hospitals to better integrate specialist services and facilitate under-graduate and post-graduate medical training.

I had been aware of the New Med II problem for some time as the Mater Hospital was within my Ward boundary as an Alderman and by the time I was elected had become a major political problem in my electorate of Waratah. The lack of capital funding to complete the project had been a significant problem for my predecessor, Sam Jones MP, but was a lesser a problem for me.

Mr Jones had also taken the significant step of approaching some of the waterfront union officials in an attempt to apply additional pressure on the government.

To the best of my knowledge, all the persons involved are now deceased so complete verification is virtually impossible.

Laurie Brereton is still alive and I have not been able to track him down so much of my comment is heresy from associated union officials marginally involved in at the time.

The Olsen report, like many other ministerial reports, was received but no action was taken on the recommendations for some time. Unlike Parliamentary Reports, Ministerial Reports do not have to be made public and can reside with the relevant departments for as long as is convenient for the principal officers concerned.

I could find no comment in the Parliamentary Library Archives in relation to the Olsen report until the first funding announcement in the Treasurer's Budget Speech in September 1983. Both the Mater Oncology Unit and the new hospital were specified within the Health documents.

The John Hunter Hospital site at that time was within the boundary of the electorate of Wallsend which was held at that time by the State Treasurer, the Hon. Ken Booth MP. It was a significant announcement for the Treasurer himself, as well as the whole of the Lower Hunter region, and was well and truly trumpeted by the local press and public commentators.

Some time during 1982 my advice is that a delegation, comprising the officials of the Waterside Workers' Federation and the Seamen's Union at least, in the company of Mr Jones MP and Dr Owen James, Director of the Hunter Area Health Service, sought and were granted a meeting with Premier Neville Wran and Minister Brereton.

The exchange of views resulted in a declaration by the industrial delegates that the Port of Newcastle would be closed to traffic – in or out – for an unspecified period until the Newcastle hospital funding crisis was addressed. Port related unions had already agreed to the proposal but I am unclear as to any commencement date nor could I establish how many other unions were involved but it was clear that there was no dissent at organisational level.

It was noted that the Premier reacted badly to say the least. His reaction would have been loud and direct. His comments would leave no doubt in the delegates' minds as what he thought of the threat. Later in my political career I was to witness a similar outburst and lived to tell the story. As a former marine engineer I thought I had a fair grip of profanities but you could also learn something new from the Balmain boy!

Those were the days of 'Wran's Navy' when ships lay in the bight at anchor for days on end waiting for a berth at one of the coal loaders. Port congestion was a real problem; any disruption to the coal chain industrial network between the mines and the port meant a potential delay in royalty dollar receipts with significant risks to the States finances.

I understand that proposed funding had been allocated to a later budget but the action taken did result in a compromise being reached and the proposed stoppage never occurred. The 1983 budget announced specific funding for the planning phase of the John Hunter Hospital at Rankin Park and funding for the completion of New Med II at the Mater and construction of New Med 1 facilities at the Royal Newcastle Hospital

My 1984 election saw the funds for New Med II secure. Bunkers for the linear accelerators were constructed but no full scale new units had been ordered for the Hunter.

The comment at the time was that the Sydney Medical Mafia was fighting a rearguard action objecting to the provision of major cancer treatment being located outside metropolitan Sydney but I'll leave that suggestion to the medical professionals.

The NBN Telethons provided significant assistance as did the many other forms of public subscriptions. Over \$2 million was raised to cover the cost of a new multi-modal linear accelerator. Minister Peter Anderson was personally responsible for ensuring that the new unit was specifically sourced for the Mater. Tragically the initial unit was destroyed by fire in early 1986 which halted operations for some six weeks. Due to the efforts of the Department of Health and the Government Insurance Office a replacement was purchased and, as a result of the intervention of the then Federal Member, Qantas flew the new accelerator to Australia at sea freight cost so reducing the out of service period by at least four weeks.

By 1991 after significant boundary redistribution Waratah included the almost completed John Hunter Hospital which was officially opened by Premier Greiner early that year in spite of some delay in earthquake repairs and staffing problems.

A further effect of the boundary change was to give me the largest number of public hospitals in one electorate in the Lower Hunter. It was a tough time for those hospitals. There were different battlefronts at each unit.

John Hunter had been finished within budget and ahead of schedule but had also sustained earthquake damage in 1989 as I mentioned. The Board was urging completion of the building and staffing was still causing problems. The Mater still required additional facilities for cancer treatment. Western Suburbs was changing function and Wallsend and Kurri Kurri Hospitals were threatened with closure and various departments were already being relocated.

The trade union movement again came alive and active in the form of Miners and Retired Miners Lodges mobilising in defence of both Kurri Kurri and Wallsend hospitals. Way back the miners had been paying a levy of threepence a week towards both the establishment and maintenance these two hospitals due to the lack of medical facilities being located near the mine working and they considered those hospitals their property. The day after the election was declared I was called on to lead the protest procession in company with Lodge officials from Kurri Kurri town centre to the Workers Club where resolutions condemning the Government and demanding a reversal of the hospital closure were unanimously passed. The Wallsend protests were bigger and considerably more vocal as they included more diverse groups, both union and community with massive media coverage.

In the first Greiner ministry, health was in the hands of the Hon. Peter Collins who was quite well disposed to Dr Owen James, but Collins was replaced by the Hon. Ron Philips who not only wanted to close Kurri Kurri and Wallsend but also demanded that either the Royal Newcastle or Wallsend be closed in spite of the Board's resistance under the chairmanship of Mr. John Varnum, resident Deputy President of the Industrial Court of NSW.

This resulted in some ugly scenes especially at Wallsend where, on a visit prior to the attempted closure, I was escorted off the premises in company with a member of the hospital Ladies Auxiliary as some sort of risk prior to the entry of Mr Philipps and Mr Tim Smyth, the new Area Director. This was the only time that I had ever been removed from a public facility in my electorate and that action did not go down well. It is significant that both Wallsend and Kurri Kurri Hospitals are still vital units of our local health services albeit with modified functions.

The political reaction to the union activity in support of retaining and improving our local health services resulted in Dr. Owen James's removal with loss of all financial benefits and no real opportunity to appeal. That action remains a blot on both major parties when in government.

Redress for Dr. James was not forthcoming until later in the Carr Government's first term, but that's another story for another speaker.

11/11/2017.