

TAMBLING, Grant Ernest John (1943 -)

Commonwealth Parliament

Senator, NT, 1987-2001 (CLP)

MHR, NT, 1980-83 (CLP)

Parliamentary Secretary to Minister for Health and Aged Care (1998-2001)

Parliamentary Secretary to Minister for Social Security (1996-1998)

Parliamentary Secretary to Minister for Transport and Regional Development (1996)

Member, Federal Executive Council (1996-2001)

Deputy Leader in the Senate for the National Party of Australia (1990-93)

National Party of Australia Senate Whip (1987-90)

Senate Standing Committees: Selection of Bills (1989-90), Senators' Interests (1994-95), Library (1996-2001)

Senate Legislative and General Purpose Committees: Participating member - Community Affairs Legislation (1994-96), Economics Legislation (1994-96), Economics References (1996-97), Employment, Education and Training Legislation (1994-96), Environment, Recreation and the Arts Legislation (1994-1996), Finance and Public Administration Legislation (1994-97), Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation (1994-96), Legal and Constitutional Legislation (1994-97), Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation (1994-97), Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References (1996-97)

Senate Estimates Committees: C (1993-95), E (1987-1989), F (1990 and 1995)

Joint Statutory Committees: Public Accounts (1980-83)

Joint Standing Committees: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (1987-93)

House of Representatives Standing Committees: Aboriginal Affairs (1980-83)

Northern Territory Legislative Assembly

MLA, Fannie Bay, 1974-77 (CLP)

Executive responsibility for Community Development (1974-75), Finance and Community Development (1975-76), Finance and Local Government (1976-77)

Member, Administrator's Council (1974-77)

Member, Consultative Committee on Constitutional Development of the Northern Territory (1976-77)

Commissioner, Darwin Reconstruction Commission (1975-78)

Deputy Leader, Majority Party (CLP) (1975-77)

Local Government

Alderman, Chan Ward, Darwin City Council, 1972-74

The Howard Government's *Interactive Gambling Bill 2001* marked Senator Grant Tambling's fall from grace from his conservative Northern Territory Country Liberal Party (CLP). His refusal to accept the advice of the party's Management Committee 'to

cross the floor and vote against the Bill regardless of any amendments' resulted in him being disendorsed as its number one Senate candidate for the next election and led to him instigating action against the CLP in the Northern Territory Supreme Court and an inquiry by the Senate Committee of Privileges into whether the CLP's attempt to direct him how to vote amounted to a contempt of the Senate.

Tambling had been re-endorsed for a further term by the CLP on 18 February 2001. Five days after he had supported the Howard Government's legislation to ban online gambling, carried in the Senate by 34 votes to 28 on 28 June, a special Central Council meeting of the party voted to revoke the endorsement. Ultimately, the CLP and Tambling agreed to end the squabble by conducting a new preselection and by the CLP paying Tambling's legal costs. The Central Council met on 14 September 2001 and again voted that 'Senator Tambling's position as the preselected candidate for the Senate at the next Federal election be revoked immediately'.¹ A disappointed Tambling accepted the verdict, knowing that his political career would end at the election, which was held on 10 November 2001. He was replaced by CLP Senator Nigel Scullion.²

It was a sad end to an illustrious political career that spanned local, Territory and Federal politics for nearly 30 years and included service in the House of Representatives as well as the Senate, where he sat as a member of the parliamentary National Country Party (NCP) and then National Party of Australia (NPA) and was appointed to federal Coalition shadow and ministerial positions.³

Grant Ernest John Tambling, the eldest of three children and known to his friends as 'Tambo', was born at Wondai, near Kingaroy, Queensland, on 20 June 1943. His father, Ernest 'Tam' Tambling, originally from the Queensland Darling Downs, first moved to Darwin in 1926 after serving in Europe in World War 1 and then training as a teacher in the United Kingdom. He taught in Darwin schools and those down the old railway to Katherine, where school children affectionately referred to him as the 'swaggy teacher'. He met Edna Williamson, also a teacher, who had moved to Darwin in 1938 from southern Queensland and was teaching at the Darwin Primary School. They married in 1941 and temporarily left the Territory between 1942 and 1946, when Ernest Tambling served as a captain in the army, posted to bases in New South Wales and Queensland.

The family returned to Darwin after the war, where the young Tambling attended the Darwin High School and Adelaide Boys' High School, matriculating in 1960. Back in Darwin, he worked and studied by correspondence for four years, before moving to

¹ Report of the Senate Committee of Privileges hearing into Possible Improper Influence and Penalty on a Senator, 103rd Report, June 2002, pages 5-10, 18 (hereafter Privileges Report).

² Unlike senators representing the states, who are elected for six year terms, those for the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory face re-election at every general election for the House of Representatives. Each of the mainland territories first gained two senators from 1974. Australian Electoral Commission, Electoral Pocketbook 2005, Canberra, page 24 (hereafter AEC, Electoral Pocketbook).

³ The NCP was known as the Australian Country Party from its inception in the Commonwealth Parliament on 22 January 1920 until the name change on 2 May 1975. The name changed again to National Party of Australia from 16 October 1982. Davey, P, *The Nationals – The Progressive, Country and National Party in New South Wales 1919-2006*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 2006, pages 452, 453.

Sydney for three years and joining the AMP Society as an insurance sales agent. While in Sydney, he met Sandra (Sandy) McDowall in 1967, when she was in her final year as a trainee nurse at Hornsby District Hospital. Her parents, Alex and Mary McDowall, were among Tambling's insurance clients. Sandy followed Tambling back to Darwin in 1968, working at Royal Darwin Hospital, and the couple married on 1 February 1969. Tambling continued to build his career with the AMP, covering Darwin, Arnhem Land and Gove, 'until cyclone Tracy blew away all my clients in December 1974'.⁴

From the early 1970s, he became increasingly active in community affairs and politics. He was an alderman for the Chan Ward of the Darwin City Council from 1972-74, before becoming a member of the first fully elected Northern Territory Legislative Assembly, holding the seat of Fannie Bay from 1974 to 1977. After cyclone Tracy, he was appointed a commissioner on the Darwin Reconstruction Commission from 1975-78. In the NT Legislative Assembly, he variously held Executive responsibilities for community development, finance, and local government and was a member of the NT Administrator's Council, the Territory equivalent of the Commonwealth Executive Council. He was a member of the Consultative Committee on Constitutional Development of the Northern Territory (1975-77) – an issue that he pursued passionately throughout his career – and was Deputy Leader of the Northern Territory Majority Party, the fledgling CLP, from December 1975 to September 1977.⁵

The CLP evolved in 1974, combining the interests of the Australian Country Party - Northern Territory, which was established at the instigation of its federal counterpart in 1966 to successfully support the campaign of Stephen Edward 'Sam' Calder for the seat of Northern Territory in the House of Representatives, with those of the largely Darwin-based Liberal Party.⁶ Tambling joined the CLP in its first year of existence. Calder's retirement opened the opportunity for him to successfully contest the CLP's preselection and win the seat of Northern Territory at the Commonwealth elections on 18 October 1980.

As the CLP had no party room in Canberra, he sat as a member of the NCP, as had Calder before him. Another CLP representative in the Commonwealth Parliament, Senator Bernard Francis 'Bern' Kilgariff, had sat as a member of the NCP from his election on 13 December 1975 until 8 March 1979, when he switched to sit with the Liberal Party under new arrangements which saw the CLP end its sole affiliation with the federal NCP and become associated with both the NCP and the Liberal Party of Australia. While the joint association arrangements enabled CLP representatives in the Commonwealth Parliament to choose which non-Labor party they would sit with, there was a general understanding that they should divide themselves evenly between the NCP and the Liberals, based to a large degree on the fact that both those parties had agreed to

⁴ Information from Grant Tambling, 3 September 2008.

⁵ Heatley, A, *The Territory Party: The Northern Territory Country Liberal Party 1974-1998*, Northern Territory University Press, 1998, page 138 (hereafter Heatley, Territory Party).

⁶ The CLP was officially launched on 20 July 1974. Heatley, Territory Party, page 9. Calder was the Member for Northern Territory from 26 November 1966 until his retirement on 19 September 1980. Commonwealth Parliamentary Handbook, page 624.

provide financial support to bolster the CLP's administrative capacity.⁷ The NCP's Leader at the time, John Douglas 'Doug' Anthony, argued strenuously and unsuccessfully to keep Kilgariff in the NCP's ranks.⁸

Tambling's tenure as the Member for Northern Territory lasted only one term, but helped to shape his priority political interests – aboriginal advancement, public accountability, statehood and further development for the Northern Territory, and closer links with south east Asia, particularly Indonesia. He became a casualty of the rout inflicted on the conservatives by the Labor Party under Robert James Lee 'Bob' Hawke on 5 March 1983, when the Fraser-Anthony Coalition was reduced from 74 seats at the October 1980 elections to 50.⁹ Tambling returned to business interests in Darwin in news agencies, town planning and company directorships for building societies and health insurance.

Kilgariff's retirement at the elections on 11 July 1987 gave him the opening to resume his political life. He successfully won CLP preselection and election to the Senate. As the only CLP representative in the Parliament, he wanted to maintain his allegiance with the NCP, now known as the National Party of Australia.¹⁰ But there was a problem.

The 1987 double dissolution elections had been called a few months early by Prime Minister Hawke to maximise the advantage to Labor of the ill-fated Joh for Canberra campaign – a push by the Queensland National Party Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, to move to Canberra and ultimately become Prime Minister. Among Joh supporters was a group in the Northern Territory, including quite a few dissident CLP members, who formed the NT Nationals and sought affiliation with the federal National Party. One of them, Alice Springs-based aboriginal businessman and consultant, Bob Liddle, had run against Tambling in the elections.¹¹ Tambling made it clear to National Party Leader, then Ian McCahon Sinclair, that if the party accepted the NT Nationals' affiliation, he would have no alternative but to sit with the Liberal Party. The NPA's

⁷ The resolution of the CLP Central Executive on 2 February 1979, endorsed by a CLP Special Conference in Darwin the following day, provided that 'the Federal CLP Parliamentarians be permitted to sit in the Party Rooms of their choice in Canberra'.

⁸ Kilgariff went on to become the Government Whip in the Senate in 1981 and Opposition Whip from March 1983 until his retirement from Parliament in July 1987. Forrest, P and S, *They started something – A biography of Bern and Aileen Kilgariff*, Peter and Sheila Forest, Darwin, 2005, pages 283, 284. The even split of CLP representation between the two non-Labor parties in Canberra went out of kilter between 1984 and 1987 when former NT Chief Minister, Paul Anthony Edward Everingham, elected to the seat of Northern Territory, sat with the Liberals in the House of Representatives, while Kilgariff sat with the Liberals in the Senate. Commonwealth Parliamentary Handbook, page 632. Tambling said this caused tension in the National Party and further convinced him that he should sit with the Nationals. Interview with Grant Tambling, 17 September 2008.

⁹ AEC Electoral Pocketbook, page 98.

¹⁰ The seat of Northern Territory was won at the 1987 elections by Labor's Warren Edward Snowdon. The second Senate position at the 1987 elections was won by Labor's Robert Lindsay Collins. Commonwealth Parliamentary Handbook, pages 484, 598.

¹¹ Heatley, *The Territory Party*, pages 83, 94.

Federal Management Committee resolved the issue by voting at a special meeting on 28 July 1987 to reject the application.¹²

Tambling identified his bedrock priority in his maiden speech to the Senate on 16 September 1987: 'I will never be apologetic about being parochial in my advocacy for the Northern Territory ...'. He listed many new commercial ventures, mining expansions, aboriginal initiatives in developing tourism, growth in education infrastructure, and the establishment of new Defence Force facilities as examples of how the Territory had come of age and deserved full statehood: 'It is time the Federal Government recognised that statehood is essential now if Territorians are to take their place as equal Australians, with the same rights, privileges and responsibilities and the same degree of self-determination as other Australians. Territorians will no longer allow themselves to be treated as second class citizens.'¹³

In the Opposition years to March 1996, Tambling was an outspoken critic of government mismanagement and waste, probing in the Estimates Committees to expose examples across a range of departments and agencies. He was also in the shadow ministry from April 1990 covering the areas of regional development, external territories and northern Australia; community services, external services and northern Australia; housing and community services; and housing, external territories and northern development.

He was a parliamentary secretary, or junior minister, in the Howard Government from 1996 until 2001, variously in the portfolios of health and aged care, social security, and transport and regional development. He ranked among his achievements initiatives to win substantial funding for expanded Defence Force establishments and construction of the Alice Springs to Darwin leg of the North-South railway, better regulate the food, complementary health care and pharmaceutical industries, including negotiating reciprocal arrangements for complementary medicines with Thailand, Vietnam and the Republic of China, and establish Centrelink, a body created from the old Department of Social Security that handled Commonwealth welfare payments. He recalled that as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Social Security – the senior minister being the Liberal Party's Senator Jocelyn Newman (Lib, Tas) – he oversaw a review into the assets test on rural customers, leading to the Farm Household Support scheme, and represented Newman in the 1997 set-up of Centrelink.¹⁴ As Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Aged Care, he steered the first set of legislation on genetically modified food through the Senate in 2000.¹⁵

¹² Minutes, Federal Management Committee, 28 July 1987, National Party Federal Secretariat, Canberra.

¹³ Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 16 September 1987, pages 182-186.

¹⁴ *Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 28th edition, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 1999, pages 244, 245, 609, 753; Interview with Grant Tambling, 26 September 2008; information from Grant Tambling, 6 November 2008.

¹⁵ Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates 14 August to 7 December 2000, *Gene Technology Bill 2000*; *Gene Technology (Licence Charges) Bill 2000*; *Gene Technology (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2000*, second readings page 19369.

He was a constant participant in debates on aboriginal affairs – administration of Northern Territory land councils, indigenous education, reconciliation, native title, health, and alcohol education and rehabilitation.¹⁶ He said that as a member of the Estimates Committees his probing on these issues led the then Department of Aboriginal Affairs to ‘leak like a sieve’, providing him with ‘hundreds of significant issues and questions which, when I posed them, caused major governance and financial embarrassment to the Hawke Government’.¹⁷ Despite these efforts, he lamented that aboriginal advancement had still not found the right answers, even by 2008, in spite of massive monetary investment, the experiment with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), and the 2007 intervention by the Howard Government: ‘Despite huge dollar investments by Federal, State and Territory governments over the years, and many symbolic and worthwhile land and cultural initiatives, basic and fundamental health, education and communication needs continue to be ignored and lifestyle standards are having to be imposed.’¹⁸

Tambling was awarded a Centenary Medal in January 2001 for service to the Northern Territory – undoubtedly as much for his involvement in numerous community and charitable organisations as for his political activities.¹⁹ He said he inherited the ‘community participation ethos’ from both his parents, adding that while they were ‘zealous and active conservatives they were both totally impartial and avoided active party politics’.²⁰

With elections on the horizon towards the end of 2001, he advised the CLP he would seek preselection for a further term and was duly re-endorsed. But his future political career came unstuck with the internet gambling legislation. The CLP, at organisational and Territory Assembly levels, was strenuously opposed to the Bill for fear it would damage the Territory’s online gaming businesses – the NT boasted Australia’s only operational online casino, Lasseters.²¹ Tambling, not an anti-gambler, was concerned at the potential for online gambling to lead to greater addiction and associated social problems. He did, however, successfully argue for amendments to the legislation that met some of the concerns of NT gaming interests.²² But that was not good enough for the CLP, which also saw the Bill as intruding on the Territory’s right to make its own laws. In a statement in June 2001, the party’s president, Suzanne Cavanagh, said Tambling must vote against the Bill and warned ‘if the Senator does not heed that advice

¹⁶ For example, see Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates 9 August to 9 December 1999, pages 7252, 10553, 7831, 8046; 15 February to 13 April 2000, page 12273; 14 August to 7 December 2000, pages 16534, 18016; 6 February to 10 May 2001, page 22899; 6 August to 27 September 2001, page 27593.

¹⁷ Information from Grant Tambling, 6 November 2008.

¹⁸ Information from Grant Tambling, 6 November 2006.

¹⁹ Its an Honour website – See <www.itsanhonour.gov.au>. Tambling’s father was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) on 2 June 1962 for services to education and personally received the award from Queen Elizabeth II on board the royal yacht Britannia in 1964. Information from Grant Tambling, 10 September 2008.

²⁰ Information from Grant Tambling, 10 September 2008.

²¹ Transcript, The World Today, ABC Radio, 4 July 2001.

²² Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 27 June 2001, page 25270,

then he can be certain that the party that pre-selected him will review that decision'.²³ Had Tambling capitulated to the party's directive, he would have broken ministerial solidarity and had to relinquish his position as Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Aged Care.

In what would have been cold comfort, Prime Minister John Howard said Tambling had 'done a good job and he did the right thing [in supporting the legislation]'.²⁴ and the Senate Privileges Committee found that the CLP had purported to direct him as to how he should vote on the Bill; had imposed a penalty on him by twice revoking his endorsement; and, while it had been 'reckless and ill-judged', on balance, and given that Tambling reached a settlement with the organisation, 'a contempt of the Senate should not be found'.²⁵

In one of his last speeches to the Senate, Tambling outlined the unfinished business he hoped his successor would pursue – aboriginal health and education, taxation on rural and remote Australia, further transport development to broaden sea lanes and air routes into Asia, and additional defence facilities, including a space base, on the Indian Ocean territories of Christmas Island and Cocos (Keeling) Islands – 'Australia's aircraft carriers in the Indian Ocean'. While external territories, both areas fell within his area of responsibility and the islanders voted as part of the Northern Territory electorate. He offered a personal apology to the Territory's Aborigines for not having furthered their interests faster: 'So I say sorry. I say sorry very fundamentally for the things that I have not accelerated fast enough ... I did not get enough done, and I hope that others will pick up many of those important programs.'

He called for a national referendum on statehood for the Territory and also on euthanasia: 'I am still a champion for euthanasia and for legislation in that area ... I would call for a national referendum on the issue of euthanasia because I believe that will set at a particular point in time a very important debate.'²⁶ Tambling opposed a 1996 private member's bill to outlaw euthanasia, introduced by the Liberal Party's Kevin Andrews (Menzies, Vic), because not only did he believe in medically-assisted euthanasia, but also because the Andrews bill, which was ultimately supported by a conscience vote of the Parliament, overturned Northern Territory laws which supported voluntary euthanasia. To Tambling, the Andrews bill went against previous Coalition support for the independence of Territory legislatures. He remained a firm advocate of

²³ Suzanne Cavanagh media release, 18 June 2001, Privileges Report volume of documents, page 80. Perhaps coincidentally, the CLP lost government for the first time in 27 years at the Territory elections on 18 August 2001. Tambling believed his treatment by the party and the extensive publicity the controversy received, particularly in the Darwin press in June and July (see *Northern Territory News* 12, 20, 30 June 2001; 5, 7, 9, 10, 18, 20 July; 10 August 2001), contributed to the election defeat. Interview with Grant Tambling, 26 September 2008.

²⁴ Transcript, ABC Radio, The World Today, 4 July 2001; *Northern Territory News*, 18 July 2001.

²⁵ Privileges Report, page 19.

²⁶ Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 26 September 2001, pages 27953, 27954.

medically-assisted euthanasia, but said he was content ‘to leave it to future political generations to revisit the issue when the time is right’.²⁷

In his final newsletter to the electorate he cited increased funding for the Territory as one of his major achievements: ‘The biggest job was always getting dollars for the Territory into the budget – and I am particularly proud that in the 6 Howard Government Budgets we have lifted Commonwealth expenditure from \$1.2 billion per annum, to \$1.9 billion, that’s a whopping 60% increase.’²⁸

Back in Darwin, Tambling became a voluntary advisor and facilitator to several community, church and education organisations. He established himself as a public affairs consultant and in 2003 was appointed to review allowances and salaries paid to Darwin City Council aldermen and to chair a panel reviewing the Commonwealth’s renewable energy legislation.²⁹ He was appointed Administrator of Norfolk Island from 1 November 2003 and in a parting shot to the CLP declared on the eve of his departure that it had to ‘get rid of the dead wood’, including its then leader, Denis Burke.³⁰

He arrived as Administrator in the midst of considerable upheaval in the normally peaceful, if not idyllic, island community: the trial of a New Zealand chef for the brutal murder at Easter that year of an Australian working on the island, Janelle Patton. The notoriety generated by the event was compounded in July the following year when the island’s deputy chief minister was shot and killed: ‘Ivens ‘Toon’ Buffett was shot and killed by his psychiatrically disturbed son. This occurred at the Legislative Assembly chambers, a hundred yards from Government House. Both incidents caused considerable community angst and inevitably affected the island’s desirable destination status.’

The island also faced financial and administrative challenges during Tambling’s term. The locally owned airline collapsed in 2004/05, with devastating impact on the tourism industry, which made up 90 per cent of Norfolk’s economy, and leaving the local Government facing solvency problems in 2005. Canberra helped by funding capital works programs to maintain local employment. It also critically reviewed governance and administration of the island, but took no further action in the lead up to the 2007 Commonwealth election. After his retirement as Administrator in August 2007, Tambling reported comprehensively to both the Howard and subsequent Rudd governments, and the Senate Select Committee on State Government Financial Management, helping to establish an ongoing review process of the island’s financial and constitutional status.³¹

²⁷ Information from Grant Tambling, 6 November 2008. See also Senate Legal and Constitutional Legislation Committee Consideration of Legislation Referred to the Committee – Euthanasia Laws Bill 1996, March 1997.

²⁸ The Tambling Report – Farewell Edition 2001, page 1.

²⁹ *Northern Territory News* 18 February, 26 March 2003. Most of the recommendations of the report, Renewable Opportunities – A Review of the Operation of the *Renewable Energy (Electricity) Act 2000* – September 2003, were supported by the Howard and subsequent Rudd governments.

³⁰ *Northern Territory News*, 29 October 2003.

³¹ Information from Grant Tambling, 6 November 2008.

Tambling returned to Darwin to enjoy family and travel interests and his hobbies of gardening, drama and reading. He and Sandy had two adult children, Coryn and Amalia, and three grand children, Reuben, Hamish and Grace. Tambling was made a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Management and in April 2008 accepted an appointment by the NT Labor Government as a part-time member of the Development Consent Authority, a body with town planning responsibilities for the City of Darwin.

Round-faced and jovial, Tambling was a tenacious character who preferred to resolve issues by negotiation rather than confrontation, but who was not afraid to mix it with the best in political forums and stand firm on his beliefs. Apart from his stands on aboriginal issues, euthanasia and Territory rights, he crossed the floor in the House of Representatives in June 1981, voting against his National Country Party colleagues, to support an amendment to limit the duration of the domestic two airline agreement.³² He was also an avowed republican, openly campaigning in favour of a 'yes' vote at the republic referendum on 6 November 1999. He travelled extensively and constantly throughout the Territory to keep abreast of local issues and was considered 'meticulously organised' and 'professionally staffed', priding himself on taking on 45 staff members between 1987 and 2001 – 10 of whom were university students or interns - and launching several into professional careers in non-elected politics.³³ A lay preacher of the Uniting Church and a former chairman of its Darwin congregation, he maintained close links with many of his former parliamentary colleagues and an ongoing interest in Commonwealth and Northern Territory politics.

Tambling regarded his time in the Senate as the most rewarding of his service at local, Territory, Commonwealth and 'vice-regal' levels. He looked forward to the time when senators from the Northern Territory, perhaps in collusion with those from the ACT, might hold the balance of power, adding 'that will make for an interesting scenario of interests equal to the initially envisaged role of the Senate as the 'States' House'.³⁴

Paul Davey

³² Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 3 June 1981. The final amendment, proposed by Peter Shack (Lib, Tangney, WA) sought to limit the agreement to five years. Despite being supported by six other Liberals and Tambling, it was defeated by 56 votes to 53.

³³ Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 27 September 2001, page 28252.

³⁴ Information from Grant Tambling, 6 November 2008.