

# HAROLD EASTON: BUSINESSMAN, KEILOR COUNCILOR, SCHOOL ADVISORY COUNCILOR, 1956

## Background



Harold Edward Easton was born about 1915 and nothing much else is known about his early life. His connection with St Albans High School is that he was appointed to the inaugural School Advisory Council in 1956 representing Keilor Council, and that his younger daughter, Toni Easton, enrolled at the school in 1958.

Harold Easton married Agnes Lorna Self in August 1939 and it seems that both were from Footscray. Agnes was related to the Self family of St Albans, who also originated from Footscray, though it's impossible to know at this stage whether the family connection is what drew Agnes and Harold to settle in St Albans.

However, it is clear that Easton's early connection to St Albans was partly through church and performance connections during the 1930s. Easton was a singer and member of a Footscray performing company and some of their entertainments were held in St Albans. In 1938 Easton played a singing part at the Mechanics Institute hall under the auspices of the St. Albans Girls' Gymnasium Club. To quote: "... a Footscray company of talented young artists staged a delightful cantata in the local hall. The performance was worthy of greater patronage, and those who attended showed their appreciation by enthusiastically encoring many of the items ... and the singing of Mr. Harold Easton as the woodman was greatly appreciated."

Mr Harold Easton married Miss Agnes Self in August 1939 at the Church of Christ, Raleigh Street, Footscray. One of the bridesmaids accompanying her was her sister Alice Self. The reception took place at the Sunshine Town Hall where over 200 guests were entertained.

In 1939 he was back in support of the Christian Endeavour Society's birthday tea where the Sunday School children sang their anniversary hymns. Easton added to the entertainment by singing "Open the Gates of the Temple" and "The Holy City". He would also perform at social and family functions, as was the custom of the times; for example, when Miss Bernice Self and Mr. Alf Goddard were about to be married in 1947, an evening celebration was held at the St Albans hall and some 200 residents attended to wish them very best wishes on the eve of their marriage. During the evening Mr. Harold Easton sang two songs in his usual capable manner. The Stevens family of St Albans were always in fine voice for such occasions with Agnes Stevens often being the piano accompanist and at least one her sons doing the singing.

Easton's work with the St. Albans Presbyterian congregation continued through the Sabbath School anniversary celebrations. In 1940 the local paper reported that during several weeks of diligent practising, the children had been well-trained and continually inspired by the "reverent and enthusiastic conductorship" of Mr Harold Easton: "the young folk justified the skill and the patience of their gifted instructor in the pleasure their singing brought to all who heard it."

Harold and Agnes Easton settled into their Victoria Crescent home and raised two daughters. Pamela Rae Easton was born 26 March 1943, attended St Albans Primary in 1948 and went to Sunshine High in 1955. Toni Easton was born 31 October 1946, attended St Albans Primary in 1952 and went to St Albans High in 1958. Her classmates included a mixture of "old" and "new" Australians, exemplified in Glenda Barlow as a home-grown Aussie, and Hannelore Henschke representing the new wave immigration that was now dominating all the local schools.

Easton's Hardware Store at 8 East Esplanade opposite the railway station was opened for business on Monday, August 12th, 1946, for general and domestic hardware, paints, turps, oil,

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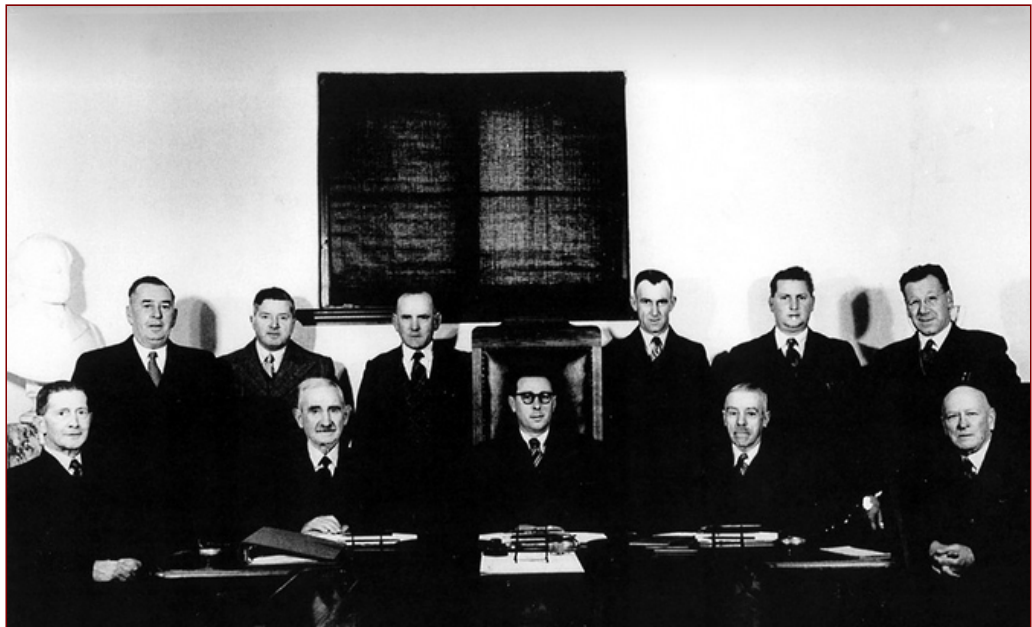
tools, crockery, electrical goods, garden tools, bicycles and part, motor accessories, etc. As an inducement to shoppers Easton advertised that goods would be home delivered free of charge! He also advertised "easy terms" of repayment over five years, though one wonders if this was ever taken up.

Having settled into local business, Harold Easton had a good opportunity to become even more involved in district activities. It helped that they were living in a street with some of the town's movers and shakers: families like Self, Goddard, Hewitt, Moffat, and Drs. Pat and Josephine O'Brien. The street's connection to the St Albans football club was legendary through players like George Haynes and committee members like Wal Baulch, to the extent they known as part of the "Crescent Crushers".

When "Mr. St Albans" - Cr. Frederick Charles Stenson - decided to retire from the Keilor Council in 1947, many prominent residents approached Easton asking him to stand. His candidature was unanimously endorsed by the St Albans Progress Association and the election committee included Norm Self, Alfred Clarke, and Dick Yeomans, who were all active members for several local causes. Alf Clarke, who was involved in "every movement for the good of St Albans" met an untimely death in 1950 when he and his wife Gertrude Annie were struck by a hit and run driver while walking along Main Road.

Easton did not win the 1947 by-election. His opponents had been Dan Gavaghan (of Labor persuasion) and James Eddie (of Liberal-Country Party leanings). Unfortunately for Harold Easton, Agnes Stevens had favoured James Eddie as the most progressive candidate and he was elected with a majority of 95 votes, which was a decisive victory in that era. In the following year Easton stood against the retiring councillor Alexander Dickson and challenger Alexander Wright. This time Easton won by the narrow margin of three votes for the Maribyrnong Riding. When Easton's first term in office expired in 1951, there were no challengers to his nomination, so he was duly declared elected. At the end of this term Easton must have felt like a seasoned veteran as he and his wife were tendered a complimentary social evening after their two years as the municipality's leading citizens. A large crowd was present at the Keilor Shire Hall to enjoy a pleasant evening of musical items and dancing. A clock was presented to Cr. Easton to commemorate the occasion.

Cr. Easton used his position on council to argue for better technology and local services. He wanted phones for new businesses to be installed without delays and encouraged council to approach the PMG's department for a telephone exchange to built at St. Albans. He became an area representative with the Board of Works. With fellow councillors and parliamentarians he met the Chief Commissioner of Police asking for better police facilities: a pre-fab office was promised to be erected near the St. Albans fire station in East Esplanade and a policeman from Sunshine would be in attendance at regular hours. He pushed for co-operation with Sunshine Council about resurfacing their common boundary, which was Main Road East and West.



Harold Easton (centre) with councilors and senior officers, Keilor Council.

Easton was appointed as Justice of the Peace in 1953; with a growing population at times needing legally witnessed signatures and declarations it was handy to have such a centrally-located businessman available during the day.

The rapid housing developments in St Albans created problems with quickly-erected but sometimes suspect quality of housing - part bungalows were one thing, but living in sheds was not permitted. Keilor councilors at times were confronted with motions ordering the demolition of structures that did not meet the basic dwelling requirements. Easton reported that when some migrants bought land from George Eisner they told him they were going to build garages and live in them; the building inspector confirmed that some structures were jerry-built. The problem was that some people were building sub-standard places and then selling them and letting others "carry the baby." Easton said he was reasonably happy with the efforts of the people of St. Albans who had been allowed to build part of their houses: "The population of St. Albans wouldn't be a quarter of what it is if the council hadn't helped by giving people a chance to get a roof over their heads."

A much bigger problem of sub-standard construction had to be confronted in 1954 when the local hall was condemned. This meant that 120 children would be without a school because they were using the St Albans Mechanics' Hall as their classrooms; they were part of the overflow from St. Albans State School where about 750 are enrolled. The hall was also used each Friday and Saturday night to show pictures. Parents say the Education Department promised to build a new school some time ago on a block of land at East St. Albans. They say the hall, which is cramped and has no ventilation, is not a fit place for children to stay all day.

Cr. Easton, who was the treasurer for the school committee and member of the Keilor Shire Council, called the situation a disgrace: *"We know the Mechanics' Hall is only a dump. It was built 70 or 80 years ago, and will come down as soon as the contract for a new one is completed in two or three weeks. Another 60 children are taken by bus each day to Deer Park because there's no room for them at St. Albans. Teachers at St. Albans voluntarily gave up their staff room for an extra class this year. Another class is held in a corridor. The department has sent out three prefab buildings, but it's not enough."* (The Argus 29 July 1954.)

The situation was indeed serious for the school population. The St Albans Progress Association noted that in 1950 there were only about 850 people in St Albans so the school was large enough to cater for the children's primary education. But in 1953 St Albans had a population of about 5,500 people and three-quarters of them were New Australians. Locals were observing that one or two new families were moving in every week. The big increase in population meant that the character of the Maribyrnong Riding was changing in other ways and this was noticed at council elections. In August 1954 Easton was due for re-election to Keilor Council and won a close

contest by 14 votes against Clement Sydney Buckingham (594 votes against 580). The close poll in the Maribyrnong Riding showed the growing strength of Labor in the St. Albans area. Buckingham was affiliated with the Labor Party and the increasing European presence coincided with an increasing Labor vote. The other Riding Councillors were James Eddie and Bert Moffatt.

The condition of the Mechanics Hall as a school venue was resoundly slated by the Shire Health Officer, Dr. John Egan, in November 1954:

*"The state of the main schoolyard and conditions existing in the public hall annex and environs require urgent attention. On inspection of the hall I found 45 children in the main room which was very draughty in winter time. Another class of 45 was conducted in a small annex room of the hall; desks were jammed together and the teacher was unable to move from her position at the head of the class. Ventilation in this room was non-functional, air being oppressive and stale even with the windows wide open. The room was definitely not suitable from a health point of view as a school room for a class of this size. The yard was an absolute quagmire apart from a narrow asphalt strip near the hall. The drinking taps are exposed in the yard. Two lavatories were in fair condition. I consider the hall a most unsuitable place for use as a school unless considerable improvements are made."*

Cr. Easton moved that a copy of the Health Officer's report be sent to the local member of parliament with a request that he confer with the Minister of Education and Minister of Public Works to see that immediate improvements be carried out. It was probably such actions that brought mainstream attention to the little town.

Newspapers came out to witness this "School of All Nations" and little stories circulated on the grapevine and in the newspapers about how people were learning to cope with the immigrant arrivals and their often difficult to understand accents and the difficult to pronounce names. Even the Argus got in the act:

*"Lot of migrants live out St. Albans way, so the shopkeepers have name trouble. Most of them have overcome it by asking customers to spell their names when they give an order. It's become a sort of habit. Chap was in the local hardware store yesterday. Proprietor Harold Easton got out his pad, licked his pencil, and asked: 'Will you spell your name, please?' Customer said: 'Certainly, S-M-I-T-H' ..."*



**Harold Easton, 1950s**





St Albans Primary School students, nationality profile, 1956.



Mr Boyle (center back) and "National Assembly" students from St Albans Primary School, 1956.



Toni Easton (back row, 4 from right) and Form 2G, St Albans High School 1959.

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