



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

GRIEVANCE DEBATE

Legge, Professor John AO, Hirst, Dr John

SPEECH

Monday, 22 February 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Monday, 22 February 2016
Page 1804
Questioner
Speaker Leigh, Andrew, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Dr LEIGH (Fraser) (19:57): John Legge passed away on 4 February 2016, aged 94. In the words of the former president of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Elaine McKay, 'John Legge, more than any other, was the founder of modern Asian studies in Australia.' He spent time in the 1960s at Cornell University, then the pre-eminent centre of South-east Asian studies in the United States. He was inspired by the work of George Kahin and, in John's words:

At the end of my Cornell semester came the next part of the plan—fieldwork in Indonesia focusing on local government. Across the United States by car, over the Pacific by Dutch cargo ship, to Singapore via the Philippines and then by KPM ship to Java. That six months was to be the first of what became more or less annual visits to Indonesia.

As Tony Milner noted in his obituary of John Legge, he worked in that era in which there was a broad recognition that 'the age of European empires had ended'. John Legge was central in developing the Monash Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, working with the other South-east Asia specialists in Monash and throughout Australia: Herb Feith, Cyril Skinner, Ian Mabbett, Michael Swift, Jamie Mackie, Milton Osborne and, of course, my father, Michael Leigh.

It is testament to John Legge's work at Monash that the John Legge Study Space at Monash opened last year. He contributed a number of important works, including a biography of Sukarno published in 1972 and a general history of Indonesia published in 1964. He was engaged in the teaching of Indonesian at a school level, serving on the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Board. He was a member of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia from 1964 and became a Jubilee Fellow, and he was an Officer of the Order of Australia. As Ian Hancock noted:

He had the gift of being 'one of us' while never letting 'us' think he was other than the boss.

Elaine McKay noted of the Monash Centre that:

The Centre rested on the conviction that it should be built on the disciplines and should carry forward the values and perspectives that the disciplines could bring to interdisciplinary discourse.

and said of John that he was:

... instrumental in the establishment of the Asian Studies Association of Australia ...

He served as its founding president.

In a eulogy for John Legge, Bob Elson noted:

My new professor was small and wiry of stature, wearing a tweedy kind of jacket and a bow tie. But his punchy walk to the lectern was without affectation and betrayed a high level of energy and purpose. ... His gaze married penetrating steeliness and a playful, chuckling humour bursting to emerge.

Bob Elson said of John Legge that he was 'the best teacher I have known,' and said:

John taught me that history is not about the past so much as it is about the analysis of historians' debates and disputes about the significance of the past ...

Yes, he loved Indonesia, but, as Bob noted:

I never formed the impression that John romanticised Indonesia or its people.

John will be greatly missed by his children Colin, Kate and David; their partners Gai and Greg; and his grandchildren Max, Jack, Tom and Harry.

John Legge was a friend of our family. He stayed in our home in Jakarta for a couple of weeks in 1980 and was ever the perfect gentleman. He had a back problem and was off for a swim to ease the pain every morning. As my father Michael Leigh summed it up: 'The triumvirate of John, Herb and Jamie really anchored the study of South-East Asia at Monash University. I recall graduate students listening intently to comments on their papers, first from Herb, then Jamie, and waiting somewhat fearfully for John's finale. Even his most devastating demolitions were phrased in such a way as to embody some words of encouragement and suggest a pathway toward academic redemption.'

To conclude: Saya mau mengucapkan terima kasih banyak-banyak atas kesempatan di Parliamen ini untuk menjelaskan kontribusi yang luas dan kaya oleh Professor Dr John Legge almahum.

I also want to acknowledge the passing of historian and public intellectual John Hirst, who passed away recently aged just 73. John Hirst was at the La Trobe University history department from 1968 to 2006—a history in itself. He was head of the department, and author of 16 books which have shaped our understanding of Australia. Among them are *The Oxford Companion to Australian History*, *Australian History in 7 Questions* and *The Shortest History of Europe*, which has sold more than 100,000 copies—more than 10,000 copies in China alone.

Chris Feik, John's editor—and, thankfully, mine too on two books—said:

He had a sociological imagination of great originality, and the historian's gift of synthesising vast amounts of material and seeing new patterns and meanings. His work will surely endure, for its originality, scholarship and deep intelligence.

In a beautiful obituary, Frank Bongiorno described John as 'a fiercely independent intellectual'. He talked about how John challenged orthodoxies created by some of the profession's biggest names:

So Geoffrey Blainey thought distance shaped Australia? Hirst was doubtful, and he outlined his case to his colleagues ... Russel Ward reckoned that the noble bushman ... was the typical Australian? What about the pioneer, asked Hirst ... The federation of the Australian colonies was a mere business deal? Hirst wrote a whole book, and a very good one ... putting that one to rest ...

Frank Bongiorno said of John Hirst, 'Australia never quite lived up to his ambition for it.' He recognised John Hirst's belief:

... that historians should be public intellectuals grappling with difficult things that mattered.

As Frank Bongiorno put it:

Hirst was a frequent contributor to newspaper opinion pages not because he particularly enjoyed the limelight ... but because it was part of his ideal of engaged citizenship.

National Museum of Australia Director Mathew Trinca paid tribute to John Hirst as 'one of the leading historians advising the museum in the years preceding its opening,' and a member of its governing council from 2003 to 2009. He said:

Dr Hirst believed that understanding the past helps us make sense of our present and future, and that we are all the better for having a keen-eyed historical view.

The great Stuart Macintyre said of John Hirst that he was 'an accomplished and strikingly original historian'. I do not agree with the member for Warringah very often. But he put it beautifully when, in describing John Hirst, he said:

Australia has lost a fine mind, clear thinker and good bloke.

Robert Manne said:

He was extraordinarily independent, had a penetrating intellect, and was courageous and very generous.

And Ben Wilkie's tribute to John Hirst in the *Spectator* noted his observation that:

... if you believe there is no national identity, for instance, the Japanese from Australians, try going to Japan and acting like an Australian, and see how you get on.

John Hirst's writing is too broad, vast and important for me to try to do any justice to it in the time I have here, but I would recommend to honourable members his wonderful piece, in *The Monthly* in 2008, on what it was like to write the official history of Australia to be given to new migrants. The section on diggers opened with the following:

Except for small-scale battles between settlers and Aboriginal people, Australia has been a remarkably peaceful country. There have been no civil wars or revolutions. It is strange, then, that it has a very strong military tradition and that the ordinary soldier, the digger, is the national hero.

Sense and nonsense in Australian history ends with an envoy in which John Hirst talks about a Vietnamese busker playing a didgeridoo. I would recommend that to honourable members too.

As Franklin Bongiorno said, 'He did not jump on and off bandwagons.' He was an egalitarian, a social democrat and a Republican.

Not long after I was elected, John and I had lunch in the members dining room. He had been kind enough to include an extract of *Imagining Australia* in his book *The Australians*, talking about mateship. He had liked that my first speech argued that Labor should claim the Deakinite small 'l' liberal tradition, though he thought I had undersold George Reid. I always think of John when I drive past the suburb of Reid in the centre of Canberra.

As the saying goes, a man dies twice: once when you stop breathing and once when you are forgotten. Thanks to John's books, many a significant figure in Australian history will be better understood by generations to come and they too will ensure that Australians will not quickly forget John Hirst.