



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ADJOURNMENT

Jacobi, Hon. Ralph, AM

SPEECH

Tuesday, 12 March 2002

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Page 1073
Questioner
Speaker Cox, David, MP

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Mr COX (Kingston) (10.32 pm)—Ralph Jacobi was one of South Australian Labor's great representatives. He passed away after a long battle with cancer on 16 January. Ralph was born and raised in suburban Adelaide. After leaving school early he worked in an abattoir and as a painter before joining the Royal Australian Navy in 1947. After the Navy he worked as a hospital orderly. It was then that Ralph became involved in the labour movement. He represented state government workers, including hospital workers, as secretary of the Australian Government Workers Association. The union was in a precarious financial state at the time he was elected secretary. However, under his leadership the membership grew. It was the beginning of a public life that was dedicated to serving the interests of working people.

Ralph won the marginal seat of Hawker in 1969 and went on to defeat seven Liberal candidates at eight elections until he retired in 1987. He survived the defeat of the Whitlam government, but his toughest electoral fight was against former state premier Steele Hall in 1977. It was the classic battle between the Liberals' money and Labor's traditional grassroots campaigning. The night before the poll I remember seeing Liberal Party workers—businessmen in suits—putting up false news hoardings declaring Hall the winner in an attempt to subliminally influence voting intentions. None of it worked. Ralph won by just 770 votes. After that experience, Steele wisely vowed never again to challenge him and moved on to the greener Liberal pastures of Boothby.

Ralph was most ably assisted in that campaign, as in many others, by one of the most formidable marginal seat campaign teams South Australia has seen, run by his friends, state ministers Ron Payne and the late Geoff Virgo. The basis of Ralph's electoral success was the tremendous personal service he rendered the people of Hawker. They knew Ralph; they had met him on their doorsteps, in their workplaces, at their schools and at their nursing homes. If someone had a problem Ralph preferred to see them in their homes rather than in his office, and he was prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to help them. This was a practice he did not abandon when he retired from parliament. Many times over the years Ralph advised me, 'Old son, remember, you don't win a single vote by what you do in Canberra.' It was advice about putting the needs of the people you represent first, and it did not stop him making a substantial contribution in Canberra. Ralph had a number of longstanding interests, including the Murray-Darling Basin, introducing a private member's bill in 1981 to establish a research body into freshwater management. Company law, insurance and superannuation were other major policy priorities. Ralph was vigorous in these issues over many years. He was on the phone to me only a few weeks before he died to offer advice about the HIH collapse.

The Leader of the Government in South Australia's Legislative Council, Paul Holloway, who worked for Ralph for 12 years, reminded me today that Ralph was one of the first members to identify the problem of Australia's emerging tax avoidance industry. Ralph placed on notice hundreds of questions about the growth in tax avoidance during the 1970s, highlighting one of the Fraser government's and the present Prime Minister's greatest policy failures. Ralph was also passionate about world affairs, particularly the Middle East. His extensive private library on the Middle East has been donated to the Flinders University. Probably Ralph's greatest political disappointment was that he was not made chairman of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade in 1984. That appointment went to a then recently elected former diplomat, my Labor predecessor in Kingston, Gordon Bilney. Ralph's fierce independence and personal modesty probably hindered him reaching the front bench where many less capable than him have served. Ralph Jacobi's contribution was considerable. He will be missed by his family, the labour movement, his parliamentary colleagues and the community he so faithfully served.

I would also like to note the passing of Miss Kay Brownbill, who died in February at the age of 88. Miss Brownbill was a writer, a journalist and a broadcaster, and was a Liberal member for Kingston. She won the seat in the Vietnam election of 1966 and was defeated by Dr Ritchie Gunn in 1969. She was the first woman elected to the House of Representatives from South Australia and was only the third woman in Australia to be so elected. I extend my condolences to her family.