



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

CONDOLENCES

Uren, Hon. Thomas, AC

SPEECH

Monday, 9 February 2015

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Plibersek, Tanya, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney—Deputy Leader of the Opposition) (14:17): To many of us on this side of the parliament we cannot imagine a Labor Party without Tom Uren. My friend the member for Grayndler spoke very movingly about his great friend and mentor but, really, Tom was more like a father to the member for Grayndler than just a mentor. And so he was to many of us on this side of the parliament a great comrade, a great friend and a great mentor. Before I was the member for Sydney, before I was even the Labor candidate, he supported me in my preselection for the seat of Sydney. He was absolutely unstinting in his support of the member for Grayndler, of me and of many others on this side. He was a great inspiration, a great elder statesman and a very loving friend.

He had a great belief in the obligation of all of us to do what we can to help others. As a young, strong man in a prisoner-of-war camp Tom made sure that he always lifted the heavy end of the log as a matter of responsibility, because he could, and what his mates could not carry he would carry for them, and when they could not walk they would lean on him. Looking back, later in his life, he said that his great regret was not when those who were weaker than him needed his protection and strength, his great regret was that he felt pride at opportunity rather than humility. You understood the measure of him as a human being when he spoke about his love not just for his fellow prisoners of war but that he was able to translate that love even to his enemies, his wartime enemies.

He was left not with bitterness after the war but with an unshakable conviction of the importance of mutual support and collective action—taught to him by his great mentor and friend Weary Dunlop. He came home too with a deep dedication to the cause of peace. He saw those bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and they bred in him an unyielding revulsion of the idea of nuclear weapons.

He was also the first member of parliament to question Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, in August 1962, and was always a presence at those marches. He remained close—always, right through his life—to the government in Vietnam and travelled there many times. As the member for Grayndler said, his support was for the veterans of the war in Vietnam and Australian veterans of all wars, and he was very proud indeed of Prime Minister Gillard's agreement to provide compensation to all former prisoners of war.

Tom Uren was Minister for Urban and Regional Development in the Whitlam government, and the residents of Sydney have much to be grateful to him for: the preservation of the inner-city working-class communities, Glebe, Woolloomooloo and Millers Point, and our beautiful harbour foreshore. Tom had a vision that any Australian should be able to walk from headland to headland, along the harbour foreshore, that it should not be just the preserve of the rich, and he did all he could to see that vision come to fruition. But it was not just the beautiful harbour foreshore that he cared about—as the chair of the Parramatta Park Trust, he was absolutely dedicated to having green, open space for the residents of Western Sydney too.

He lived a long, rich and full life and never gave up his activism within the Labor Party and his activism within our community. He had many causes and many friendships beyond the Labor Party as well. He was called an honorary Josephite by the Josephite nuns. He was a great supporter of the work of Saint Mary MacKillop. He was a great supporter of the independence of Timor-Leste and counts the leaders of the independence movement among his closest friends. He would quote to us often the words of Martin Luther King, 'Hate distorts the personality and scars the soul. It is more injurious to the hater than the hated.'

If you could define such a long and rich and varied life by one philosophy, that philosophy that Weary Dunlop instilled in him of the strong looking after the weak—of each of us having a responsibility to all of us—and that philosophy of Martin Luther King—that hate distorts the hater and damages the hater more than the hated—would be his two guiding tenets. To his wife Christine, daughter Ruby, and Michael and Heather, his children with his beloved first wife, Patricia, our thoughts are with you. We have all lost a great friend and a great comrade.