



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE
CONDOLENCES
Evans, Mr Harry
SPEECH

Monday, 22 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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Questioner
Speaker Abetz, Sen Eric

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Senator ABETZ (Tasmania—Leader of the Government in the Senate, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Public Service and Minister for Employment) (10:02): by leave—I move:

That the Senate records its deep regret at the death, earlier this month, of Harry Evans, Clerk of the Senate from 1988 to 2009, places on record its appreciation of his long and meritorious service to the Parliament of Australia, and particularly to the Senate, and tenders its profound sympathy to his family in their bereavement.

I am confident to say that the late Mr Harry Evans would not want a motion of condolence to be moved in this place, but I am equally confident that it is appropriate and right that we do this today, the very first sitting day since the news of his death, because of the singular contribution he made to the institution that is the Australian Senate. It is a consequence of the relatively high turnover of this chamber that many current honourable senators would not have worked with former Clerk Evans, but I am sure all will be aware of his authoritative writings and his high public profile, as he saw it, as a protector and defender of the Senate.

Harry Evans joined the Department of the Senate from the Parliamentary Library in 1969. As President Hogg said on the eve of the Clerk's retirement from the Clerk's chair in 2009, the reason Harry was recruited was that the then Clerk, Jim Odgers, had noticed the quality of Harry Evans's prose. It was a very fortunate recruitment. Mr Evans went on to steadily move through various offices of the Senate, eventually becoming a Clerk Assistant and then Deputy Clerk. In 1988 he became Clerk of the Senate just before the parliament moved up the hill into its new and permanent home. He served for a record of 21 years as Clerk of the Senate and head of the Department of the Senate. This is a record that will never be eclipsed because of the statutory limit of 10 years introduced in 1999.

Clerk Evans was a champion of the rights of individual senators. He had served as secretary of the Standing Committee on Regulations and Ordinances and helped the committee develop its noble reputation as being a guardian against the excessive use of executive and delegated power by governments. He also set up the Procedure Office as a response to the increasing number of senators who did not represent the major political parties. While the current make-up of the Senate presents a challenge to all of us, I have no doubt that Clerk Evans would have revelled at the prospect and would have been delighted to see the steady growth of the size of the crossbench because he saw it as a part of the necessary handbrake on executive domination of the parliament.

It is important, however, for me to note, as someone who as a minister worked very closely with Clerk Evans, that while he propounded strong and well-argued views on the role of the executive and the importance of the Senate maintaining its powers of scrutiny, he was equally encouraging of senators from major parties pursuing their own approach and he was an adviser without parallel when senators got themselves into sticky procedural situations, as occasionally happens I am informed.

Clerk Evans rewrote the Senate standing orders into the readable and concise set of rules that govern us today and, if anyone has read some of the standing orders of the state houses of parliament, we can be very thankful that what we have is much clearer and straightforward. He also consolidated and edited several editions of our Senate practice, which he renamed to honour his own mentor, Jim Odgers. That is now a ready and valuable reference in this parliament and, indeed, many other legislatures.

Clerk Evans was regarded as the doyen of the clerks not only in Australia and the Pacific but also further afield and he was especially highly regarded by the clerks or parliamentary officers of other upper houses in the parliamentary democracies of the world. He was an authority on the Federation debates and keenly aware that our founding fathers in writing the Australian Constitution did not blindly follow the British prescript but also included elements from the United States such as equal representation of all the states in the Senate regardless of population, and even Switzerland, which provided some of the basis for our federal referendum provisions. Clerk Evans was also a particular authority on, and fan of, a founding father from my own state Andrew Inglis

Clark whose affinity with North America played much of a role in the drafting of our Constitution. Clerk Evans's legacy is the strong and robust Senate we have today. It is not one that the person occupying the chair of the leader of the government always enjoys, but it is the legacy that all of us who value the Senate cherish.

Harry Evans loved the position of words. He loved the quiet and grandeur of the Australian bush. Above all he cherished the Australian Senate and loved his family. It is to them that we turn our minds today. Because of illness Harry was robbed of the long retirement that he had so richly earned. To his wife, Rhonda, their sons, Ben and Sam, and their daughter, Beth, we offer our sincerest condolences. We will never see the like of Harry Evans again, but this place is all the better for the monumental contribution he made to the parliament of Australia.