

John Gordon (Jack) Evans

Political Eulogy by Andrew Murray¹; Tuesday 13th October 2009
The Chapel, Pinnaroo Valley Memorial Park Whitfords Avenue Padbury Perth

I am honoured that the family asked me to speak today.

A eulogy is an expression of praise. Jack's immense political achievements extended over thirty five years. He was indeed worthy of praise, a man not only of great significance to Western Australia, but of real significance to Australia itself.

Jack Evans was of great significance to Australia because he was the Founding Father² of a political party that has had a great and enduring impact on national life; on the nation's political life, governance and institutions; on electoral reform; and on social, economic and environmental policy.

I will eschew statistics and chronology and try to give you something of the flavour and meaning of Jack's politics.

The words that summarise Jack Evans and politics are 'constant effort' and 'tenacity'. That and his character won him the admiration and respect shown him in life and death.

He was a progressive optimistic passionate and determined campaigner for a better Australia. Strongly anti-nuclear and pro-environment; strong on participatory democracy; intent on freeing up business with better market systems; strong on tax reform; committed to education, to human rights and social justice; and intent on better political checks and balances. He was an intensely value-driven policy modernist.

He was a warm caring and enduring friend. In politics he was persistent to exhaustion but not stubborn; he was pragmatic but principled, knew when to say no and when to compromise; he was compassionate but not maudlin, hard-headed but soft-hearted.

There were times when he and his party were assailed in WA and nationally. He survived some hideous pressures awful moments and terrible disappointments with his hopes ideals and humour intact.

I only met Jack in 1994 when he was already 66, but a more energetic and upbeat personality would be hard to find. Politically he was well-informed and well-connected, wise and able. I valued his advice so much that he was on my part-time staff from my first to my last day as a Senator.

That means Jack finally left the workforce aged 79.

¹ Australian Democrats Senator for WA 1996-2008.

² Australian Democrats Press Release Julia Melland National President 2 October 2009 mourning Jack's passing and calling him their 'Founding Father'. 'Father' connotes special respect, but is also recognition of the Democrats having been in his continuous care, as their progenitor.

Jack was impelled into politics by the events of 1975.³ His representative political life as a Senator from 1983-1985⁴ was cruelly short but busy and impactful.

His organisational political life was long distinguished and dedicated, ranging from the heights of National President and National Campaign Director to the grinding work of countless grass-roots meetings and committees, often accompanied by the eternally supportive Margaret.

His last speech in the Senate extolled the considerable virtues of Margaret and family, and his last words to me did the same.

When Margaret first hooked up with Jack as a teenage sweetheart, she could not have imagined what she was in for. Insiders know what great strains such political commitment puts on family life. The Evans did not just expend time, their political campaigns were self-funded and their business suffered.

His family will tell you Jack was always interested in politics, galvanised by ideas and current events, a great reader, always on for a debate. He was a born organiser, persuasive, (it helped to have that mellifluous voice), careful in keeping notes and records, diligent, methodical, hard-working, available at all hours, and blessed with a good memory. But never too busy to pass the time of day.

One highly-ranked former Democrats staffer told me:

Jack was always courteous, thoughtful, respectful. In a party with many waverers and as many, if not more, disorganisers - Jack stood apart.

The Australian Democrats nationally could not have been established and later revived in WA after near-collapse without Jack.

As to his national impact; in Don Chipp's own words⁵:

...had it not been for Jack Evans there would be no Australian Democrats...Contrary to popular belief when I resigned from the Liberal Party in 1977, my whole intention was to get out of politics. The last thing in my mind was to help to form a new political party. It was Jack Evans, whom I had not met then, who pleaded with me to come and address a meeting in Perth. It was in Perth, with Jack Evans chairing an

³ In Jack's own words: "On 11 November 1975 Margaret and I were holidaying in Hobart Tasmania and drove to the top of Mount Wellington to enjoy the vista. En route we tuned into the ABC radio station and listened to proceedings in the Federal Parliament. We were stunned to hear...Malcolm Fraser and the Governor General [had] effected a peaceful coup of the Australian Government. I shan't dwell on the analysis of the events of the day only to say that we feared a violent eruption from the left of politics as the day proceeded. We were scheduled to fly back to Perth the following day and on our plane was Senator Steele Hall who was going to Perth to form a WA branch of his New Liberal Movement Party. He invited us to a planned meeting of interested people and from that meeting the new LM was formed in WA."

⁴ 5 March 1983- 30 June 1985. Jack first stood for the Senate as a candidate for the Liberal Movement in 1975. When the Liberal Movement and the Australia Party merged to become the Australian Democrats he stood unsuccessfully twice more in 1977 and 1980, at considerable personal financial cost. His running mate was his great friend the renowned Shirley de la Hunty; who later also supported Andrew Murray on his 1996 Senate ticket.

⁵ Senator Don Chipp Hansard 31 May 1985 page 2949

overflowing meeting in the Perth Town Hall⁶, that the Australian Democrats were born.

The wonderful Stephen Swift, National Campaign Director for the Democrats for 15 years wrote to Jack before he died:

To have kick-started a national political party once in the '70s is impressive enough. To kick-start it twice, and get four WA Democrats elected within eighteen months in the 90s, was truly miraculous. Without your steady hand on the tiller, your experience and your steadfast belief that it could be done, it would not have been. You had belief enough for us all (and the best radio voice in the business!).

Sam Hudson, that amazing two-decades Democrats National Secretary, should have the last word:

Jack was Jack, he was always there. I can't remember a time when Jack was not there - for the Party, for the members. Sort of like the Democrats security blanket. Whilst ever Jack was there, everything was OK. In his quiet way, in his lovely dulcet tones, he soothed, inspired, negotiated, led, mentored and sometimes persuaded. He was admired and respected by everyone from every party. He was our light on the hill. To me Jack was the light that bathed us in his warm glow and I am grateful to have spent over 30 years of my life knowing him.

For Pam and I he was our friend, from the first day we met to the day of his passing. We owe him a great deal. We will remember him with pride and gratitude.

⁶ 29 April 1977