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Abstract
George Petersen died recently in Shellharbour Hospital. His wife Mairi and stepdaughter Natalie were with him. George had been hospitalised for eight days, with complications arising from his cardiovascular system. During these days he had the constant care of family, friends, and the excellent hospital staff. With their company and comfort, he faded away without pain on 28 March 2000. This obituary is not a work of history, nor even biography. It merely recounts a few passages in a long and busy political life, adding some political commentary taken from George's own words.

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Obituary

GEORGE PETERSEN (13/5/1921–28/3/2000)

Rick Petersen

George Petersen died recently in Shellharbour Hospital. His wife Mairi and stepdaughter Natalie were with him. George had been hospitalised for eight days, with complications arising from his cardiovascular system. During these days he had the constant care of family, friends, and the excellent hospital staff. With their company and comfort, he faded away without pain on 28 March 2000.

This obituary is not a work of history, nor even biography. It merely recounts a few passages in a long and busy political life, adding some political commentary taken from George's own words.

George was born in 1921, the offspring of north European immigrants to Queensland who arrived in 1800s. His grandparents were farmers, but George's parents had left the land, and he was born into the Australian rural working class.

George was an accomplished high school student, but poverty and the great depression ensured that he left school at age 15. He obtained a clerical job in the Bundaberg post office. By then he was under the influence of the political upheavals of the depression, and two communist uncles.

He was also influenced by Robert Tressel's story of English building workers, *The Ragged Trouser Philanthropists*, which he read in 1936. Many years later (1983) he told a journalist:

> Anyone who reads it at 15 and doesn't become a socialist doesn't have a heart.

The world was sinking into an abyss of fascism and war. George joined the struggle to drag it out. He wanted to go to Spain and join the fight against General Franco's military coup, but fortunately he was too young and his enquiries got nowhere.

George was conscripted into the Australian army in 1942. He

spent four wasted years in tropical north Queensland and in Borneo training for guerilla warfare. He joined the Australian Communist Party in 1943. After demobilisation he became a middle level leader in various Communist branches and organisations in Brisbane.

He later said this of his party comrades in this period, and he was also talking about himself:

> The fact was that these Communists I knew were guilty of cowardice. Cowardice in failing to admit to themselves that the liberation of the working class is a task for the workers alone, and that it won't and can't be imposed from outside by Russian bayonets. The great tragedy of Stalinism is that it took these dedicated people and it transformed their appreciation for the great step forward for humankind represented in the Bolshevik conquest of power in 1917, into a patriotic loyalty to Stalinist Russia.

Then came the events of 1956, which shattered forever George's loyalties to Stalinism. George wrote in his autobiography:

> In October 1956 British troops invaded Suez. At the same time, Russian troops invaded Hungary to suppress the Hungarian workers' revolution. I spoke at a Brisbane District Conference, urging opposition to both invasions. When I had finished speaking, Claude Jones, the Queensland President of the CPA, asked me to visit him in his office.
>
> When I visited him the following week, he urged me to read the statements issued by the French Communist Party on Hungary. I protested that there was not much to be gained by reading the French material because France had the most Stalinist party in the world. Claude looked at me quizzically and said: 'You know George, I think that your trouble is that you've lost your faith!'
>
> Having lost my faith in Christianity when I was fifteen, the possibility that my belief in communism was due to "faith" had never occurred to me. It was clear that I could remain in the CPA only if I based my political beliefs upon faith in the Party's leaders, and not upon fact and logical argument. Although I went through the motions of belonging to the CPA for the next six months, I was effectively finished as a member on the day I was interviewed by Claude Jones.

Around the same time, George was transferred to a job in the Department of Social Security in Wollongong, where he went with his family in 1957. Once there, he made contact with a

Nick Origlass and other Trotskyists in Sydney. He once said in a lecture to an Evening of Spaghetti and Socialism (on 11 April 1986):

> At the time there was not much alternative to joining the ALP. There were only two left wing parties, the ALP and the CPA. I had joined Nick Origlass's Trotskyist sect but I left it, partly because it seemed ineffectual with its emphasis on the third world, also because I couldn't believe that Russia or China were any sort of 'workers' states', degenerated, deformed, or otherwise. While I was in Nick's sect I joined the ALP as part of the strategy of entrism. I have been entering it ever since.

George joined the ALP, and did much to strengthen the organisation in the growing suburbs of Illawarra to the south of Wollongong city. Together with local steelworkers and coalminers, he set up Unanderra branch of the ALP. He became for a few years a close political associate of the major figure of the Illawarra ALP, the then-leftwing State MP for Wollongong Rex Connor. Connor urged him to stand for parliamentary office. (Connor later entered Federal parliament, and switched to the right wing of the ALP, while George stayed on its far left.)

In 1968 George was preselected as the ALP candidate for the State Parliamentary seat of Kembla, (later renamed Illawarra) and won comfortably at the election. At the 1968 Evening of Spaghetti and Socialism he reminisced:

> I've been an MP for 18 years, with 2 years to go. I have fought seven elections and five preselection ballots, and won them all except the first preselection, when I was defeated in a preselection ballot for alderman. Being defeated was the best thing that ever happened to me. I represent in state parliament a safe Labor seat – so safe that its said you'd get a pit pony up provided you branded 'Labor' on its rump. Of course the corollary is that in safe Labor seats you tend to get pit ponies. ...

He explained that his preselection was a "fluke" in the first place. And "even if I were standing for preselection again, I don't think I would win."

In standing for parliament, George's central desire, not always realised, was to be a spokesperson for organised workers. He cherished the rare occasions when he could perform this role.

In 1969 Clarrie O'shea was jailed for the crime of being Secretary of the Victorian Tramworkers Union. This triggered an Australia wide general strike. George wrote in his autobiography:

> The mass meetings that accompanied these strikes all decided

> to hold further strikes and mass meetings until O'Shea was released.
>
> On 20 May 1969, I attended and spoke at my first mass meeting at Wollongong showground. What I said was not particularly important. What was important was that, for the first time, a sitting MP was expressing support for workers actually engaged in struggle. It was a first hand revelation to me of where alternative power really resides in class society. It was humbling to feel the response of thousands of workers listening to my words and giving me tumultuous applause when I finished speaking.
>
> In a way what I was doing was fraudulent. My chances of influencing parliament were zero, irrespective of whether a Labor or a Liberal government was in office; but my being there at the mass meeting helped to give to workers confidence in their own strength as organised workers, brought together not for the purposes of the bosses but in order to articulate their own needs and demands.
>
> It is now history that somebody conveniently paid Clarrie O'Shea's fines, and he was released. Who actually paid the fines remains a mystery to this day, but one thing is certain: they were not paid by anybody in the trade union movement. The penal clauses became dead letters and were never applied again.

There is more to class struggle than picket lines, and George joined it wherever he could find it. From 1968 to 1976 he was, as he often described himself, a left wing opposition backbencher. He was far removed from the corridors of power, but used his parliamentary position to agitate for better sewerage and public services in the Illawarra, for American and Australian withdrawal from Vietnam, and for workers' rights everywhere. He agitated against censorship, against Apartheid's sporting tours, against carcinogenic emissions from the Port Kembla coke ovens, and against destruction of the natural environment. He agitated for law reform in two areas which deserve particular mention: prison and abortion.

From 1971–1976 George's main political project was agitating for prison law reform, including the prevention of systematic floggings of prisoners by NSW Prison authorities:

> It was obvious to us that the illegal violence that we were dedicated to exposing flowed from the very nature of the Australian prison system. We were (and still are) dedicated to

> replacing that system by another in which society's deviants are treated as human beings with problems and not as objects of revenge. My own view is that this will not occur until capitalism is replaced by socialism. Until that happy event occurs we have a responsibility to improve the lot of people in prison, if only for the selfish reason that we are more likely to find ourselves in prison than the members of the establishment.

One major result of his agitation was the Nagle Royal Commission Into Prisons, which was established by the Liberals, but given teeth by Labor after 1976. It made recommendations leading to some lasting reforms in NSW prisons.

George was also a regular campaigner for the repeal of anti abortion laws. In 1976 a bill was before Parliament, proposing to roll back the clock and increase and enforce penalties against women and doctors who practised abortion. George speechified:

> The bill before the house is a vicious attack on the fundamental right of human beings to control their own reproductive processes. Whether or not this bill goes through, women will continue to seek and obtain abortions. The issue involved is a simple one: will working-class women be able to obtain these abortions under medically safe, hygienic conditions, or will it be under the barbaric conditions that applied in Australia before 1971 and still applies in many other countries in the world? ... I know on which side I stand on the issue of abortion and I know on which side any person with any vestige of humanity should stand ... I contend that the reactionary, clerical, fascist bill now before the House must be rejected as an inhuman assault upon a fundamental right which has been won after many years of struggle. It is a right that will not be given up lightly by the women of NSW. I should like to assure them of my fullest support in their continuing struggle.

Mr John Maddison, then Liberal Attorney General and Minister of Justice, was the following speaker: "The government agrees to the granting of leave to bring in the bill ..." etc etc. Thus Hansard records a parliamentary debate proceeding from the sublime to the ridiculous.

The ALP won state government in 1976. As a backbencher in the Labor governments of 1976 to 1988, George agitated, along with the Gay movement, to get the state out of the bedrooms of consenting adults. Between 1978 and 1982 he proposed several private member's bills for the removal of the sections of the NSW Crimes Act which criminalised gay sex, and justified police persecution of gays. He recalled in his autobiography:

> The gay movement was delighted. A leading gay magazine featured me on its cover in glorious colour. As Lex Watson said to me, it was the first time that magazine had featured a heterosexual on its cover. Inside the magazine was a long interview with me. My friends in the Port Kembla industrial area reported to me that several workers had said to them how surprised they were to find out that I was a "poofter". The story still surfaces from time to time. My wife Mairi is greatly amused whenever she hears it.

Around this time, a gay friend of mine was impressed but puzzled. She asked: why is your father doing this? Good question I thought, so I asked him. He replied with characteristic clarity:

> Sexual preference is a fundamental civil liberty.

Correct. Enough said.

George's actions bore fruit in 1984 when laws against "buggery" and "indecent act with or without consent" were repealed. Shortly after his death, George was inducted into the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Hall of Fame, for services to the gay community.

Together with a handful of close allies George used parliament to expose the frame up of Tim Anderson, Ross Dunn, and Paul Alister, who were sentenced to twenty years prison in 1978 on trumped up attempted murder charges in 1978. This played a major part in their release in 1985.

On a larger scale, George fought against the displacement of oppressed peoples. In 1974 George went with a labour movement delegation to the Middle East, which toured Egypt, Lebanon, and occupied Palestine. He recalled in his autobiography:

> Wherever we went in the refugee camps or in the cities we found kindred souls amongst the Palestinians. They were always anxious to talk to us and try out their English on us. If one can fall in love with a people, I fell in love with the Palestinian people. Unlike other peoples of the Middle East they were one people who did not judge compatriots by their religion. Whether they were Christians or Muslims did not affect their solidarity with one another. They were fanatical about education as the only way out of the refugee camps, and they were politically sophisticated and cosmopolitan.
>
> On our first day in Lebanon we received an object lesson in Middle East politics. The BBC radio had broadcast a report that Israeli planes had attacked 'terrorist bases' in South Lebanon. We went to visit where those planes had bombed two days previously. The targets were Palestinian refugee

> camps and Lebanese villages. Over one hundred people were killed, wounded and maimed – all civilians, many of them children. The Zionists were (and still are) the terrorists, using the same tactics of mass reprisals against innocent civilians made famous by the Nazis during World War II.

George was for many years a major voice in defence of the Palestinians' legitimate right to remedy their dispossession and expulsion from Palestine after 1948.

George was also an unconditional supporter of Aboriginal Land Rights. To shut him up the NSW Labor Government put him onto the NSW Parliamentary Select Committee on Aborigines. From 1978 to 1982, this position took him all over NSW, collecting evidence and testimony from Koori people. He wrote in his autobiography:

> No matter where we went, the Aboriginal people had a legend of their ancestors being massacred. I had always believed that Aboriginal people had died out in the settled areas because of the effects of alcoholism, malnutrition, and introduced diseases. I soon found out that it was more than that. These evils had only become effective in the process of genocide after our ancestors had broken the resistance of the native people by deliberate mass murders. These massacres differed only in detail from the treatment of other native peoples by other European imperialisms, or for that matter Hitler's, Stalin's and Pol Pot's holocausts, the Israeli Zionists' expulsion, dispossession and murder of Palestinians, and the more recent phenomena of ethnic cleansing and pogroms in Central Africa and in the former Yugoslavia.
>
> What we Europeans lost by this process of extermination was revealed by a botanist whom I met at Alice Springs. He told me that as a botanist he had learned far more about the botany of Australian desert plants than he had ever learned about native plants in the more fertile areas of Australia. This was because in the desert areas he was able to learn from Aboriginal people who had not lost their language and their culture. He instanced the fact that only two native plants had been commercially propagated, the macadamia and the quandong, and that we had irretrievably lost the knowledge of the value of many more species because our ancestors had been too arrogant to learn from the Aboriginal people.

George wrote most of the Committee's Report. Consequently, NSW Parliament enacted the Aboriginal Land Rights Act – which George described as better than nothing and which established the NSW Aboriginal Lands Council.

George did not over-rate the achievements of Labor in government. He told the evening of Spaghetti and Socialism.

> I can remember only three achievements in the period we've been in government: the change in the prisons administration, which is a big improvement; homosexual law reform which virtually equates homosexuality with heterosexuality; and after seven years we've managed to get the Ananda Marga out of jail. And I almost forgot to add a fourth achievement: a double yellow line on Farmborough Road.

Then he asked: is that all? George criticised parliamentary cretinism, as practised by the pit ponies, and he often had to fight a smaller, absurder variant which he called "municipal cretinism". He never accepted the myth that politics begins and inside parliament. In the 1970s and early 1980s George and many colleagues produced a throwaway Illawarra newspaper titled *Community Voice*. He wrote in his autobiography:

> It never ceased to amaze me how they all pitched in together to organise regular working bees in various peoples' garages and homes. ... people kept turning up for our Sunday night working bees to lay out the paper, which sometimes extended to 3 or 4 am on Monday mornings.
>
> What impressed me about the organisation behind production of the paper was that there did nor appear to be any organisation. Meetings of supporters were held but they never lasted longer than a few minutes. Most of the time we were simply a band of brothers and sisters who worked together in complete harmony....
>
> Despite the fact that we were forced to close down our experience was by no means a total failure. People came to us and offered their assistance to us in a variety of ways. Every issue was a marvel of unselfish initiative. We got every issue out on time....
>
> Our experience in producing Community Voice is a pointer to what will be achieved by comrades working together in the socialist society of the future, in which, in the words of a German socialist song, we will have no bosses over us or servants under our feet.

In 1987 the Labor government capitulated to demands from the insurance industry that the compensation benefits paid to injured workers must be cut. It drafted new workers compensation laws which abolished workers' rights to sue

employers for negligence, and reduced weekly compensation benefits. Previously, George had many times voted for legislation he personally abhorred – such as legislation to de-register the BLF – because he was bound by Caucus solidarity. This time he drew line.

George's loyalty to organised workers in the Illawarra, who were fighting the proposed laws, was more important to him than his parliamentary job. He had never forgotten that he was in parliament to represent workers in struggle, not to knife them. He hopped up in parliament and said he would vote against the new laws because they represented an attack on the working class. He was immediately expelled from the ALP, even though he was actually speaking and voting in defence of its written policies.

At the 1988 State election George stood for Illawarra as the candidate of the Illawarra Workers Party. He achieved a remarkable 17% primary vote, while NSW as a whole was swinging 10% away from Labor, and 3% toward the Liberals.

George's parliamentary career was over, but his political life merely moved into new areas. He was, for over 15 years, a driving force in a campaign to prevent Walker Corporation from obliterating Shellharbour Beach in order to build a marina for the yachts of the rich. In 1991 he joined with many allies, old and new, who formed the Bring The Frigates Home Coalition to tell Bush and Hawke to get their invasion forces out of the Gulf. In 1999 he was admitted to life membership of the South Coast Trades and Labour Council.

Speakers at George's memorial service recalled that even in his final days, he was attending demonstrations in a wheelchair, and writing letters of support for political prisoners.

Throughout all these achievements, and despite a number of heart attacks starting in 1966 and open heart surgery in 1980 and again in 1996, George impressed many people with his unstinting energy, his infectious humour, and his passable singing voice in the Illawarra Union Singers. Even his political enemies could rarely deny his personal honesty, nor the clarity of his words and deeds.

George often observed that those elected to parliamentary office usually went rightwing or went cranky. He was an exception.

He was too self-effacing to spend any time wondering why, but part of the reason lies with his friends and allies in Wollongong, and in left wing politics generally. They kept him honest, and on the correct side of the class struggle.

It was a two way process. The many people who learnt much from George were also part of his education. He was an impressive

individual, but he most impressed himself when he felt part of a living movement, in struggle for a world where no-one had bosses over them or servants under them. This was where he always wanted to be, and always was from the 1930s to his final days. He was taken there by his heart and his head, as shown by the concluding words of his maiden speech to parliament in 1968:

> As one who stands for a literal interpretation of the Australian Labor Party's policy of democratic socialism, I wish to state my belief that the contradiction between social production and private accumulation will be fully resolved only by socialization of industry under workers' control, but the Labor movement has no intention of waiting until some indefinite day in the future to obtain satisfaction of our demands. We are conscious of the fact that the trade union movement and the Labor movement which we represent sprang from the constant struggle waged by workers to maintain and improve their standard of living.
>
> I am proud to be part of that struggle, as the Labor representative of the Kembla electorate. It is a struggle which will continue until capitalist society is completely rejected by the working people as an outmoded, inefficient and heartless oppressor. Ours should be a socialist society in which the people govern in all aspects of public life, economic and social as well as political – a society which applies self-government in every field of human endeavour so that man can realise his full potentialities as liberated man.
>
> I should like to submit that the deficiencies of life in the Kembla electorate demonstrate how necessary it is for the Labor movement to struggle to overcome those deficiencies as a necessary first step on the road to socialism. I hope I can continue to take part in this struggle as the Labor representative for Kembla, always remembering the words an early French socialist:
>
> 'I pass through this world but once. Let me so live that when I am dying I can say: I have given my life to the finest cause in the world – the liberation of mankind'.

George was privileged to be married to Elaine for twenty years, and Mairi for thirty years. He had a son, two daughters, and three grandsons.