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Obituary - Jeff Shaw QC: A Tribute

Abstract

Jeff Shaw was born on October 10 1949 and died on May 10 2010. He was given a State Funeral on May 19 2010. He is survived by his wife Elizabeth and sons James and Jonathon. Jeff was a son of the working class. His mother was a secretary, and his father was a printer, and a real stalwart of the Printing Trades Industries Union. He was a Labor Party member and activist from a young age but he was more interested in the 'bigger picture' - the philosophical arguments - than the corrupting quest for 'getting the numbers' to get a seat in parliament. He was ideologically of the Left, and fiercely committed to traditional Labor values.

Jeff Shaw QC: A Tribute

Mairi Petersen

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Jeff was a son of the working class. His mother was a secretary, and his father was a printer, and a real stalwart of the Printing Trades Industries Union. He was a Labor Party member and activist from a young age but he was more interested in the 'bigger picture'- the philosophical arguments – than the corrupting quest for 'getting the numbers' to get a seat in parliament. He was ideologically of the Left, and fiercely committed to traditional Labor values.

Jeff Shaw was a true Labor person who worked tirelessly for a fairer society. He was an authentic committed Labor person who never lost the faith. As a barrister he defended workers and their rights to fair wages, safe work places and freedom from discrimination. He graduated from Sydney University with a High Distinction in Labor Law and Jurisprudence. He was a QC since 1986 until the time of his passing on May 10 2010. Jeff Shaw had an extensive career in the legal profession. He served as the NSW Attorney General as well as the NSW Minister for Industrial Relations from 1995 to 2000, and then as a Justice of the Supreme Court from 2003 until 2004.

He made a lasting contribution to the justice system, as a leading industrial law counsel, during his 5 year term as the NSW Attorney General and then as a Judge. He drafted the NSW Industrial Relations Act in 1986 and eased it through Parliament. The NSW system is based on the principles of fairness and equity alongside productivity, making the Commission a meaningful umpire with the power to settle disputes, deliver wage decisions and improve the social wage through test cases and ministerial references. The Act has delivered a thriving economy and profitable businesses hand in hand with basic union rights. He wanted to reform laws he believed were unjust, ill-considered,

antiquated or just plain wrong. He was responsible for many vital reforms from issues as wide as OH&S, video surveillance at work, youth justice conferencing, industrial relations, removing scope for companies to drag asbestos cases to a victim's death to limit liability and pay equity. He would have done more in areas such as homosexual law reform, which he championed, had he received more support from the NSW Labor Cabinet.

Jeff Shaw was an activist who remained true to his principles throughout his political and legal life. He had a special interest in industrial cases. As Barry O'Farrell said, after Jeff's passing, "By any measure, Jeff Shaw was a reformist Labor Attorney General – an indisputable fact despite much of his program being vigorously opposed by the NSW Liberals and Nationals." Few whose careers in any parliament have been of similar length have left as significant a legacy of law as Jeff Shaw." As he said when he resumed his career as a barrister and represented the Public Service Association in their wage claim in 2003, "The law is my passion", which is evidenced by the fact that when he first appeared for the PSA in 1974 as a 25 year old solicitor, he broke his honeymoon at Newport to seek an interim pay increase for a section of public servants.

Jeff Shaw towered above most, if not all of his peers in law and in NSW Labor politics – and certainly towered above the generation that has followed.

Farewell Jeff – you are a real working class hero – we need more like you. We will miss your intelligence, compassion and your humanity. Our deepest sympathies go out to Elizabeth, your wife of 36 years and your sons James and Jonathon.