

PETRO GEORGIU SPEECH - Integrity Awards. Alan Missen Awards recipient. 15 June 2010

Sir Anthony Mason, Tim Smith, Members of the Accountability Roundtable, parliamentary colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

I am deeply honoured that the Accountability Roundtable has considered me to be an appropriate choice for the Alan Missen Award for 2010. What Alan Missen did spanned decades, beginning with his opposition to the Menzies' government's referendum proposal to ban the Communist Party. When one considers this, and Alan's record of independence and achievement in the Senate, then one can only conclude that the Roundtable has been generous in its choice for the inaugural Missen award.

In his twelve years in the Senate, Alan crossed the floor 41 times, he was vital to fundamental reforms in our society and Parliament. The Ombudsman, the Family Law Act, the Family Court, the Freedom of Information Acts and the establishment of the Senate Scrutiny of Bills committee. All these initiatives have stood the test of time.

The noteworthy thing is that he did all this from the backbench. This attests to his unswerving commitment to principle. No less, it is a tribute to his political intelligence, his ability to manoeuvre through the obstacles placed in his way by bureaucrats and ministers. Many people make mention of Alan's idealism. This should not obscure Alan's adeptness at the pursuit of his ideals and his ability to win through.

Reading through the condolences made by his colleagues following his death, one sees signs of discomfort sometimes caused by his relentless fight for social justice and human rights. Chris Puplick said that it was "occasionally difficult to stand there and make a speech, and have Alan Missen sitting beside me muttering under his breath: 'You have sold out again, haven't you?'" I think that we can all understand how disconcerting this would be. But at the end of the day, as manifested in their statements of respect and affection, his colleagues took the view that a person who consistently stood up for principle was entitled to be prickly at times. Otherwise, how much would actually have been achieved?

I have no personal experience of how powerful the pressure to conform was on Members of Parliament in the 1970's and 1980's. In his 2005 Missen Oration, Fred Chaney observed that "party discipline has become too pervasive". I'm not sure whether it has indeed got tougher to dissent. Certainly the imperatives and the prizes of winning government have not diminished over the years.

Fortunately for me, on our side of the Parliament, there still survives the Liberal Party tradition of independence of judgement and the ultimate right to speak and act in accordance with your conscientiously held views, even when they are not shared by the

majority of your colleagues. Indeed I think that in the course of this parliamentary term there has been something of a resurrection of a Liberal's inalienable right to cross the floor, from both the backbench and frontbench. It is a right whose value it is important to appreciate and which – if need be – must be staunchly defended.

Ladies and gentlemen, I began by saying that the Roundtable has been generous in making this award to me given the magnitude of Alan Missen's achievements. It is also generous because the matters that the Award gives recognition to are the result of the commitment of many MPs including Russell Broadbent, Judi Moylan, Judy Troeth, Garry Humphries, Allan Eggleston, George Brandis, Sarah Hanson-Young and Scott Ludlum. I pay tribute to them all.

I hope that this award will reinforce the strength of Alan Missen's spirit and example in the Parliament.

Thank you