PARLIAMENTARY EULOGY ON THE DEATH OF SENATOR ALAN MISSEN (1986)

This speech occurred in 1986 when I was a senior senator. Alan Missen and I came into the Senate together 12 years earlier and sat together for a year or so. I did not know Missen before we were in the Senate. I had been a minister and was still on the Coalition front bench; Missen was not. Many senators spoke on the condolence motion in the Senate. Reading it now, it seems that I became more a ‘Missen’ type of senator as time went on. In that sense, what is here is prescient—it described many of my emerging views where principle became more important than political advancement or advantage. I certainly followed the ‘Missen’ line in my later political life: more philosophical and more issue-based and a classical liberal.

Many of us enter these debates seldom, relying on the words of our leaders to speak for us all. This will not do for Alan Missen. He was a singular person, he was a singular liberal, he was a singular senator. As a person, he was singular because of his uncompromising and quite predictable adherence to his principles. No-one else in this place, in my time here, has approached his determination in this area. More than any other, we could use about Alan Missen—in their best sense—words written by Carlyle in 1837 about Robespierre: that he was ‘sea-green incorruptible’.¹

He was not easy to deal with on issues if you were on the other side, but it was never difficult to understand the basis on which he had formed his view, or to see the principle which guided him. This was demonstrated well as early as 1951 when he risked his career and his future place in politics to attack the referendum proposal to outlaw the Communist Party. Though not yet of voting

¹ See, for example: www.theanswerbank.co.uk/.../why-did-Carlyle-refer-to-Robespierre-as-the-sea-green-incorruptible.
age, I recall that I was appalled by the anti-liberal and anti-democratic sentiments of that referendum proposal, and was pleased that liberals as prominent and clear-thinking as Alan Missen broke ranks to oppose it successfully.

In that and in similar stands he was the continuing voice of that tradition of liberal democratic thought and practice that brought many of us to this side of politics. His personal courage was very great and his actions were taken always with complete disregard for any negative effects they would cause him.

Not surprisingly—but sadly—he was a lonely person in his public life. Some of us became even closer friends in the last year of his life and it was a privilege for us to give and to receive mutual support on political and other issues. Alan came to me for medical counsel—indeed we discussed some of his health problems by phone just three days before he died. It is sufficient to say that his health was very bad for a long time, that he had borne a heart attack privately—secretly—and that the one thing that seemed to improve his physical state most was a good stoush on an issue, whether this occurred in this chamber, or in a committee, or in the party room.

Second, he was a singular liberal—indeed he was one of the very few still around who was involved in the formation of the Liberal Party of Australia—and an examination of what Menzies was articulating then explains much about Alan Missen.

Menzies said then that ‘there is no room in Australia for a party of reaction’. Alan Missen believed this. In *The Forgotten People*, Menzies said that:

> [I]ndividual enterprise must drive us forward. That does not mean that we are to return to the old and selfish notions of laissez-faire. The functions of the state will be much more than merely keeping the ring within which the Competitors will fight. Our social and industrial obligations will be increased. There will be more law, not less, more control, not less.\(^2\)

Menzies words—but they describe Misen’s view.

Menzies said too: ‘We took the name liberal because we were determined to be a progressive party, willing to make experiments and in no sense reactionary.’ Alan Missen was active then—in 1944—he was active in writing the early documents that defined the Liberal Party, and he was imprinted for all his life with the early Menzian vision. He was a traditional liberal—as many of us today consider ourselves to be—and Australia was the beneficiary of this commitment.

Alan Missen was—except when suspended for his stands on principle—a continuous member of the Liberal Party from its formation to his death. He was always right in his total opposition to the Communist Party dissolution

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\(^2\) Menzies (1943: 10).
referendum in 1951, and the party was wrong, not only on the issue, but in punishing Missen for his opposition. After all, if we eschew the tyranny of the caucus rule of the Labor Party, we must accept the consequences of people acting to exercise the rights of dissent that our rules provide. He was prominent in the party councils and served it and the nation for 12 years in this place.

Third, he was a singular senator, or if not singular he was one of a small class of dedicated parliamentarians—institutional senators—who served the Parliament and its institutions first and foremost.

Perhaps it was inevitable that he gained no preferment. That was not very important, however, as he made a lasting contribution to this Senate and to the institution of parliamentary democracy with his work, especially his work on the committees of this place.

His commitment was particularly to the two legislative scrutiny standing committees—to the Committee on Regulations and Ordinances of which he had been chairman, and to the Scrutiny of Bills Committee whose establishment he promoted enthusiastically.

He was by nature an ‘issues’ person—perhaps quixotic on occasions but determined and passionate on a range of causes ranging from family law, freedom of information, human rights, amnesty—as chairman of the all-party group, the human rights commission in particular, south-west Tasmania, national crime authority, law and social reform, and issues affecting the environment.

He was honoured by the Young Liberal movement as its federal patron. It was a particular pleasure for me as a recent federal patron of the Young Liberal movement—one of a number of senators who have had that honour—to work and deal with Alan Missen as the long-time patron of the Victorian division of the movement.

And to the extent that any funeral can be good then Alan Missen had a splendid funeral. He would have been pleased that so many people crowded every seat in a large church, he would have been surprised that the Archbishop of Melbourne honoured him by attending and that Bishop Peter Hollingworth officiated. He would have glowed at the magnificent words spoken about him by Ian Macphee and by Peter Frankel and Peter Block. He would have enjoyed the choice of service and the tribute of Amnesty International. And he would have been pleased that Molly Missen was able to know of the real regard and respect and affection that so many people held for him.

Alan Missen was a well-qualified, well-equipped, fearless and committed servant of Australia and of this place. We shall miss him.