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## Obituary

## Scholar devoted to social justice

**Donald William Rawson**

Historian and political scientist  
 Born: Melbourne, 23 March 1930  
 Died: Canberra, 20 June 1997,  
 aged 67

DON RAWSON was known and respected across the Australian universities and outside them. A historian and political scientist, he was one of those who developed political science in the post-war years and, in doing, so made his own name as the foremost student of the Labor Party and of trade unions.

A generation of students has cause to remember him with affection, not only because of his writings, which were models of clarity and sense, but because he spent much of his energy in building research tools for others, a form of scholarly production that is more widely praised than practised.

He was born in Melbourne in 1930, the single child of a singular family. His father Roy Rawson, a notable radical, owned the bookshop that bore his name, and became a Labor parliamentarian in Victoria in the 1950s.

His mother, like Roy an Esperantist, ran a dress shop in Camberwell that catered to the bourgeoisie rather than to the working class.

Throughout his life, Don maintained a strong commitment to the ideals of social justice that to him represented Labor at its best, and he did so with exemplary good manners. While he had no doubt of the importance of trade unions and did much to make their study respectable within the academic world, his intellectual interests were wide and extended late in life to theology.

He studied history at Melbourne University after schooling at Melbourne Boys High, and received first-class honors for his first two degrees. He moved into political science during his PhD work, a journey that took him also from Melbourne to the Australian National University in Canberra.

Apart from four years spent at the University of Queensland in the 1960s, he was to spend the rest of his working life in Canberra.

His PhD thesis on the organisation of the ALP from the conscription split in 1916 to the Curtin Government in 1941 is probably the best-known thesis on an Australian subject never to have been published. No doubt he had publication



in mind, but an increasing interest in the domain of contemporary electoral politics, which produced a book on the politics of the New South Wales federal seat of Eden-Monaro and the first study of an Australian general election, kept the revision of his thesis on the back burner.

He was an excellent supervisor and mentor who was something of a magnet for younger scholars. In 1960, when I was a young graduate student at the University of New England, Rawson came to give a paper at a conference on decentralisation, a topic close to the concerns of my thesis.

It was a good conference in any terms, and enlivened by a sparkling and good-humored after-dinner speech by Arthur Calwell. But it was Rawson who captured my interest. A few years older than myself, he spoke with clarity and wit, and in private conversation afterwards came across as outgoing, helpful and perceptive.

He was that rarest of all audiences for the postgraduate student — someone who knew what you were on about and why it was important.

Once I had talked with him, I had a clear goal: to go to the ANU and do a PhD, with Rawson as my supervisor. He became the facilitator of that dream, and in early 1961, I joined his department. But by then he had gone to the University of Queensland. When my own thesis

was finished, he became one of its examiners. After a period overseas, I returned to that department as a research fellow to discover that he had rejoined it.

We formed a close friendship almost at once. He was supportive of what I wanted to do, gently purged my ideas of their excess, and kept me on track. He was a patient reader of drafts, a critic of sloppy thinking and writing, and a defender, if he thought you were being unfairly attacked in seminars or conferences.

His great contribution was to make the study of Australian politics an ordinary activity in universities. Perhaps more pertinently, he made the study of the Labor Party, of trade unions and of the arbitration system a matter that should be approached with care and a lack of partisanship, but not without passion.

It is probably true that his own perspective on the ALP — that it should above all be concerned with issues of social justice — finally became the orthodox picture of the party held by its own senior members, an amazing change if one had lived through the 1950s and 1960s, when the Cold War, the DLP and communism were the staples of discussion about Labor.

For me, his contribution was to make our discipline (I too came to political science as a PhD student after an initial preparation in history) a set of ideas and practices that ought to have a practical outcome: we were there to help our country improve its political processes and its political outcomes.

Though he once defended his work in the mathematics of political science as simply pleasurable in itself, I feel that if he had constructed a motto for political science, it would have been the command, "Be useful!". Everything he did fitted that motto.

At 60, he discovered that he had cancer of the prostate, and he endured that disease with the calm strength that was in part his natural temperament and in part the virtue of his recent conversion to Anglo-Catholicism.

He is survived by his wife Mary Dickenson, and by a daughter Helen and her two children. His spirit lives on in all that is best in Australian universities.

— Don Aitkin, vice-chancellor  
 University of Canberra

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