

# **The trailblazer who opened his heart and mind to women's rights**

By Anne Summers  
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The legendary Labor politician and former shearer Clyde Cameron, who died this week aged 95, is most often remembered for his incendiary relationship with Gough Whitlam, in whose government he served as minister for labour until he was controversially sacked and demoted to a lesser portfolio shortly before the dismissal of the entire government in 1975.

As labour minister, Cameron was a trailblazer, championing equal pay (and making the historic appointment of Mary Gaudron, QC, to argue the federal government's case before the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission), introducing reforms to the public sector he hoped would flow into the private sector while also standing up to the "fat cats" in the public service and - most notoriously - introducing the holiday leave loading to compensate for lost overtime earnings during holidays.

He was also a renowned hater, engaging in celebrated feuds with, among others, union officials such as Tom Dougherty of the Australian Workers Union and of course Whitlam.

Those, like me, who knew him well, knew he was an exceptional mischief-maker, delighting in pranks and matchmaking among the young Laborites whose ranks I belonged to in the mid-1960s. But he was also a man of exceptional integrity and, for someone who had had little formal education (he left school at 14) of extraordinary intellectual curiosity and rigour.

He has left behind at the National Library of Australia more than 400 hours of taped interviews with the key political players of his era, including with his once sworn enemy, the "Grouper" Bob Santamaria, with whom he made his peace in the interests of getting all sides of the turbulent 1950s split in the Labor Party onto the record and into the history books.

He could be obstinate and pig-headed. For instance, John Bannon, his former staffer who later became the premier of South Australia, recalled last week how he refused a visa to the singer Alice Cooper whose dress and demeanour was too much for the prudish Cameron, and he denied an accomplished Fijian chef a work permit on the grounds there were plenty of unemployed shearers' cooks around.

But he was a man of great compassion who could change a longstanding position if presented with the right arguments.

I had always taken credit for changing Cameron's mind about opposing the 1973 bill proposed by Labor backbenchers Tony Lamb and David McKenzie that would have legalised abortion in the ACT. In April that year I had been incensed to read in the

newspapers that he was not one of only eight of the 125 men in the House of Representatives - there were no women at all in those days - who proposed to vote for the bill.

I not only wrote him an angry letter stating he was "lining the pockets of unscrupulous abortionists" and "conscripting women into compulsory child-bearing", but went down to Canberra and lobbied every MP who would give us an audience. Cameron, although a busy minister, listened for more than an hour while I made my case for why he should support the legislation.

On May 10, 1973, when the vote was taken Cameron was one of 23 MPs who voted yes; 98 voted no and the bill was defeated. Nevertheless, Cameron's switch of vote was significant and in recounting this story in my autobiography in 1999 I took full credit for his conversion.

Cameron disabused me of my influence in a lengthy letter dated November 9, 1999, in which he wrote: "I can now confess that the only reason I voted for the bill was because the local Catholic bishop had filled the strangers' gallery of the chamber with nuns and priests for the obvious purpose of browbeating the Parliament into bowing to the church's demands. At any rate, that's how I interpreted the demonstration."

He went on: "But I was not the only one to see the demonstration in that light, and that was the only reason support for the bill increased from eight to 23!"

So much for my lobbying skills.

But the letter went on to reveal that Cameron had indeed undergone a change of heart on this subject, not as a result of my persuasion but due to his willingness to have an open mind when confronted with the realities of life.

For the first 60 years of his life, he wrote, "I had accepted the teaching that to abort an embryo was the equivalent of murder." Then, not long after the vote on the Lamb-McKenzie bill, "something happened that caused me to see lawful abortion in another light. It was when a young Italian who had always letterboxed a part of my electorate returned his pamphlets; and, sobbing like a child, explained he could not do the job because his partner had died at the hands of a backyard abortionist in Hindley Street."

"That tragic death caused me to understand that there are circumstances in which a decent, clean-living woman can be left with little choice but to have an abortion - especially if her partner, as is too often the case - insists on it."

From then on, Cameron was a staunch defender of women's right to choose and resisted all efforts from the Catholic Church, Right to Life and others to bring him back to the fold. He even told the Catholic bishops who lobbied him on the Lusher amendment that would have removed abortion from the Medicare schedule that he regarded war as "delayed infanticide" and wondered why the church had remained silent during the Vietnam War.

A truly great person is not hobbled by dogma but is open to intellectual and emotional expansion. Clyde Cameron was such a person, the likes of whom we seldom see in politics these days.

## **A lower bar for alpha males**

CAN YOU imagine Angela Merkel reading text messages on her phone during an audience with the Pope or while meeting with Hu Jintao? Or Hillary Clinton breaking off in speech to answer her mobile, then continuing to talk, telling the audience, "It's Bill!" Or Helen Clark standing grimly before the media, her lips clenched like a two-year-old having a tantrum, husband Peter uncomfortably at her side, while she admits to having a sex romp with a male escort during her trip to Canberra a couple of weeks ago?

No you can't? Neither can I, yet that's what the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, did recently while meeting with the Pope and later with the Chinese President. It's what the former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani did during a campaign speech a few months back, and we all remember Eliot Spitzer's confession as governor of New York that he had hooked up with a prostitute during a recent official visit to Washington DC.

It's not that female politicians are innately or invariably better than their male counterparts. They can be just as incompetent (think the NSW Health Minister Reba Meagher), or dishonest or corrupt (the Philippines President, Gloria Arroyo, the late Benazir Bhutto) as the next man. But when it comes to arrogance, utter self-absorption and moral laxity, it's the alpha males who seem to have the monopoly, as the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks argued so eloquently in these pages on Monday.