

SCOTT, Malcolm Fox (1910–1989)

[q.v. NSW], then Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, said of him: 'I and my colleagues, and I think the whole chamber, take him to be a man of unimpeachable integrity'.¹⁴

John Ferrell

WILLESEE, Donald Robert (1916–2003)



Commonwealth Parliament

Senator, WA, 1950–75 (ALP)

Vice-President of the Executive Council, 1972–73

Minister Assisting the Minister for Foreign Affairs, 1972–73

Minister Assisting the Prime Minister, 1972–73

Special Minister of State, 1972–73

Minister for Foreign Affairs, 1973–75

Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, 1966–67

Standing Committee on Regulations and Ordinances, 1952–66

Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, 1967–69

Committee of Privileges, 1969–73

DONALD ROBERT WILLESEE was born on 14 April 1916 at Derby, Western Australia, second son of William Robert Willesee, a 'hard drinking' drover, cattle buyer and stock inspector, and Ethel May, née Wrightson (also known as Flinders), a boarding house proprietor. The family moved to Carnarvon, where Don attended state and convent schools. The cosmopolitan population of Carnarvon, its proximity to Asian ports, and the fact that Don's father had worked in the Philippines, implanted a lifelong interest in foreign countries, making Don an instinctive multi-racialist. Willesee had hopes of studying law, but these were put aside when, at the age of fourteen, he joined the Postmaster-General's Department (PMG) as a telegraph messenger, after his father and older brother lost their jobs during the Depression. Don immediately joined the postal workers' union. He later described his experiences with the PMG and the union as 'the start of my education'. After working as a postal assistant at Northampton and Geraldton, he was promoted to postal clerk at Mullewa in 1936, moving to Perth in 1937, and qualifying as a telegraphist in 1938. During his time at Mullewa, Don worked at Yalgoo, where he met Gwendoline

Clarke, the daughter of the local publican. They were married at St Saviour's Catholic Church, Yalgoo, on 27 April 1940 and lived in the Perth suburb of Mount Hawthorn.¹

Willesee came from a political household. In the 1920s his father contested two Western Australian Legislative Assembly seats—Kimberley and Gascoyne—once as an independent and twice for the ALP, and his older brother Bill became a Labor member of the WA Legislative Council from 1954 to 1974, serving as Minister for Community Welfare from 1971 to 1973. Don listed Hansard amongst his early reading. Joining the ALP in 1937, he served as a delegate to the state executive from 1946 until 1955. He also served on the ALP Metropolitan District Council as a delegate (1946–49) and as vice-president. During the war years he assisted the party by broadcasting a weekly segment on Perth's 6KY, speaking on foreign affairs. Willesee was secretary (1942–44) and president (1945–47) of the Western Australian branch of the Telegraphists' and Postal Clerks' Union, and represented unions as an advocate in the Arbitration Court.²

In 1949 Willesee gained third place on Labor's Senate ticket. Elected in December 1949, he was sworn in the Senate in February 1950. He was the youngest member in a chamber then heavily weighted towards those of more mature years. On his arrival in the Senate, he found himself barred from the chamber by an attendant who told him, 'Sorry, son, senators only in here'.

In his first speech Willesee enunciated the need for a distinctly Australian foreign policy, and expressed concern at the effects of the high cost of living on 'ordinary' Australians. His dual focus on foreign affairs and domestic welfare set the pattern for his political career. In June 1951 he demonstrated his breadth of interest in foreign affairs in a wide-ranging speech emphasising the importance of foreign policy and expressing the hope that the Government would provide more opportunities for debating this subject in the Senate. He hoped for improved relations with Japan, discussed the Korean War, relations between the USSR and China, and emphasised the strategic importance of peaceful relations between India and Pakistan. He claimed that the Menzies Government 'tacitly favoured' the Dutch retaining West New Guinea. During the 1950s and 1960s he travelled to Canada, Papua New Guinea, and parts of East Asia including Japan. Willesee firmly opposed Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. In 1965 he objected to the Government committing Australian troops to combat in Vietnam without consulting the Opposition, stating that it was 'the most unprecedented action in the peace time history of Australia'.³

In an early speech Willesee stressed the importance of a national health scheme for low-income families. Debating the Supply Bill on 26 October 1950, he said: 'If we look at every penny we spend, nothing will be done. If war broke out, we should not worry about expenditure. We should find plenty of money with which to kill people. It is not beyond the ability of the Australian people to do these things'. His working experience in the PMG

was reflected in his frequent participation in debates on postal legislation, and he maintained an abiding interest in employment conditions (particularly in the public sector), including wages, superannuation, and compensation, and was a forceful advocate of equal pay for women. He often led the Opposition in second reading speeches on these subjects.⁴

In 1950 he urged that the Commonwealth find a way of overcoming the constitutional prohibition on legislating for Aboriginal Australians. He drew on his personal knowledge to describe unsanitary living conditions in camps, the neglect of children, and lack of any meaningful work. He paid particular attention to the difficult position of the 'half-caste population', and expressed the hope that with the gradual breakdown of racial prejudice, 'these people can be elevated to a higher plane'. In the same debate he spoke of the 'unfairness' of means-testing provisions for parents with invalid children, and suggested expanding social services benefits. Conservative in his attitude to the Matrimonial Causes Bill 1959, which allowed either party to a marriage to seek a divorce after five years separation, he claimed that this was the 'first time in the history of British jurisprudence in divorce that one party to a marriage can desert or commit a matrimonial offence and still seek relief from the court'.⁵

Willesee's great passions were his family, the labour movement and his Catholic faith, although he became estranged from his church during the 1950s, when some Catholic ALP members associated with the anti-communist Industrial Groups left the party to form the Democratic Labor Party (DLP). Willesee had been close to the Groupers, and had joined them in supporting a spill motion against Evatt's leadership in 1954. The next year, within party councils, he had spoken in defence of the purged Victorian executive.⁶

Willesee was elected Leader of the Opposition in the Senate in August 1966, when the left vote split between Lionel Murphy [q.v. NSW] and Sam Cohen [q.v. Vic.]. After the 1966 House of Representatives election the left agreed to support Murphy as Senate leader with Cohen as his deputy, and in February 1967 Willesee lost the leadership to Murphy by four votes. The New South Wales MHR, Fred Daly described this outcome as 'a real surprise' that 'cost Labor dearly in later years'. Elected deputy leader in November 1969 after Sam Cohen's death, Willesee held the post until his retirement in 1975. Willesee was characterised in 1973 as 'earthy, shrewd, dependable... level-headed, even in his hates, cautious without being anaemic'. Subsequent ministerial office did not increase his sense of self-importance in any obvious way. The West Australian MHR, Kim Beazley junior, noted that Willesee was 'a man who carried his own bags'. Another observer was impressed by Willesee's 'calm, centred yet authoritative demeanour' and his manner of addressing meetings 'quietly, without histrionics'. In his mid-fifties, Willesee still retained a youthful air, was careful to keep himself fit, and appeared less driven than some of his ministerial colleagues.⁷

Gough Whitlam relied on Willesee's dependability and common sense, appointing him shadow minister for immigration in the year leading up to the 1972 election. Interpretation of immigration policy had been the subject of dispute between Whitlam and the previous spokesman, Daly. Willesee was expected to take the heat out of the issue, and he did. Yet his relationship with Whitlam was far from easy. According to historian Clem Lloyd, who was Willesee's press secretary, Willesee was 'very bitter because Whitlam was always trying to imply that he was a grouper and should have left the Labor Party in the fifties with the D.L.P. [and that] he'd betrayed Evatt'. Willesee's stance needs to be seen in the context of his long battle against the influence of fellow West Australian, F. E. ('Joe') Chamberlain, for years a dominant left-wing force on the party's Federal Executive. Willesee opposed the expulsion of right-winger Brian Harradine [q.v.5 Tas.] from the party in August 1975.⁸

After Labor won the 1972 election Willesee was appointed Special Minister of State and Vice-President of the Executive Council. As Special Minister of State he assisted Whitlam in his dual roles as Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs. Willesee oversaw the development of the National Archives and the expansion of the National Library. He was a member of the Machinery of Government Committee established by Whitlam to ensure that the public service was prepared for the priorities of the new government. Between 1973 and 1975 he represented in the Senate the Treasurer and the ministers for overseas trade, services and property, and the ACT. Willesee, as befitted his reputation as a 'nuts and bolts man', was tasked with ensuring that Whitlam's foreign policy initiatives were implemented, in particular the establishment of diplomatic relations with China. In October 1973, at the United Nations General Assembly, he made a forceful and well-received speech attacking French nuclear testing in the Pacific, and the white separatist regime in Rhodesia. Earlier that year he had visited seven African nations, in what was the first ministerial visit to that continent for ten years.⁹

Appointed Minister for Foreign Affairs in November 1973, Willesee said 'this is the portfolio I wanted'. Although Whitlam had relinquished the post, he retained a close interest in foreign affairs, both in general policy areas and the detail of it. Willesee's own views were strongly held and he was prepared to express them, but in cases of disagreement it was inevitable that the Prime Minister would prevail. There were more than a few cases of disagreement. In July 1974, while Willesee was out of the country, Whitlam, in his capacity as Acting Foreign Minister, endorsed a recommendation from the Foreign Affairs Department that Australia extend *de jure* recognition of Soviet sovereignty over the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. Willesee was not consulted. Publicly, he endorsed the decision while, privately, he regarded it as hasty and politically inept. On 15 August 1974, Georgi Ermolenko, an 18-year-old violinist, attempted to defect while on a tour of Australia with a

Russian youth orchestra, but then changed his mind and wished to return home. After a week of delay, during which time several unions imposed a black ban on Ermolenko's departure, Willesee arranged for the young man to be returned to the USSR and the next year, Ermolenko and his parents migrated to Australia. Willesee survived an Opposition censure motion in the Senate, based on the Government's alleged appeasement of the USSR by its actions in the Ermolenko case, and by its recognition of the incorporation of the Baltic States. Always a strong advocate of human rights and civil liberties, Willesee was prepared to criticise actions on either side of the Cold War divide. He denounced the Soviet Government's expulsion of dissident Russian author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, as 'contrary to all internationally accepted norms of judicial process and respect for basic human rights'.¹⁰

In 1974 Australia supported resolutions seeking the expulsion of South Africa from the United Nations. This was a Whitlam initiative, ignoring the doubts of his foreign minister. Willesee was overseas in March 1974 when Whitlam, in an unsuccessful ploy to gain control of the Senate, controversially approved the appointment of the DLP's Senator Vince Gair [q.v. Qld] as Ambassador to Ireland. Willesee had strongly opposed the scheme on ethical and pragmatic grounds when it was first mooted. In the Senate, he startled both sides of the chamber by contradicting the Prime Minister about the date on which Gair's appointment became effective.¹¹

In April 1975, with the fall of Saigon imminent, Willesee was much troubled by the fate of those who might be identified with the former South Vietnamese regime. He made a determined attempt to convince Whitlam that Vietnamese wishing to enter Australia should not be subject to the restrictions applicable to other migrants, recommending in particular that asylum should be given to Vietnamese employed by the Australian Embassy. Whitlam was not persuaded.¹²

Willesee presided over the 1975 renegotiation of the agreement between Australia and the United States regarding the American communications base at North West Cape, under which the facility would now be operated jointly. Responding to suggestions from Senator Greenwood [q.v. Vic.] that the change was meaningless and a mere 'confidence trick', Willesee said that at the time of the original agreement:

Australia was a satellite of the Americans ... it never queried anything that they did and ... it never offered them any advice even in the field in which we have some expertise in South East Asia. That relationship has been altered, and that fact has been appreciated by the Americans and they have made no secret about it.

Willesee regarded the establishment of a more independent Australian position as his most significant foreign policy initiative, reflecting 'enlightened and sensible' views based on justice and the 'possibility of progress', and

centred on the issues of racism, anti-colonialism and Third World poverty. He believed that this policy had confirmed Australia's high international standing, particularly among the developing nations. Closer engagement with the South Pacific, significant increases in foreign aid, and the development of the international law of the sea reflected these policy priorities. Willesee supported Whitlam's efforts to establish a treaty of friendship with Japan, though the complex negotiations to achieve this were only concluded under Malcolm Fraser's prime ministership in 1976. In 1974, at the suggestion of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Willesee allowed his name to be put forward as a candidate for the post of President of the United Nations General Assembly in 1975, although he later withdrew from the contest.¹³

In August 1975 Portugal effectively abandoned its colony of East Timor, and civil war broke out there between the pro-independence Fretilin party and factions sympathetic to Indonesia, covertly supported by Indonesian forces. On 16 October five Australian journalists covering the unrest were killed in the town of Balibo, apparently by Indonesian troops. In December Indonesian forces invaded East Timor (by which time the Whitlam Government was out of office). The East Timor crisis exacerbated the already dysfunctional relationship between Whitlam and Willesee. Willesee emphasised the need for a proper act of self-determination by East Timor, to be 'recognised by the world', while Whitlam thought an independent East Timor would not be viable, and its eventual integration with Indonesia was inevitable, with the proviso that this should be accomplished peacefully and in accordance with the wishes of its people. Willesee believed Australia should try to persuade Indonesia to accept an independent East Timor, and was troubled that Australia might be seen as complicit in any military action by Indonesia. In August 1975 he wrote to the Prime Minister arguing that if the Australian Government, having been forewarned of Indonesian military intervention, failed to state its views clearly, it would be placed in an 'embarrassing and politically indefensible position'. As the crisis developed, much as he had predicted, Willesee considered resignation. Twenty-five years later, Whitlam was scathing about the role of his 'forgettable' foreign minister, claiming that Willesee had ignored or overlooked clear warnings of Indonesian operations at Balibo. Willesee for his part remained distressed and embittered by the handling of the situation for the rest of his days. In 1961 he had described his experience as a member of Parliament as 'an exhilarating experience', declaring that 'one can do things [here] that could never be done in any other field of work', and that this was worth 'all the insults that are sometimes heaped upon one, both in this place and outside', but by the end of 1975 he was disillusioned.¹⁴

When the Whitlam Government fell on 11 November, Willesee decided not to contest the ensuing election and withdrew from politics. He lived quietly, enjoying swimming, beach runs, and exercising in his home gymnasium.

WILLESEE, Donald Robert (1916–2003)

He continued to be a discerning punter. He chaired the Australia New Zealand Foundation from 1983 to 1987, and the Western Australian Salaries and Allowances Tribunal from 1984 to 1987. He returned to the Catholic Church after years of estrangement. In 1999 he was made a life member of the ALP. Willesee died at Joondalup Health Campus in Perth on 9 September 2003. Gwen and their six children (including media figure Mike Willesee) survived him. He was cremated at Pinnaroo Cemetery following a state funeral at Our Lady of the Rosary Church, Woodlands. Gough Whitlam was among the mourners. In the Senate, Peter Cook [q.v.5 WA] described Willesee's journey from Carnarvon to a senior ministerial post in Canberra as 'the history of a self-made, self-taught, intelligent, persistent and gracious figure'.¹⁵

Bobbie Oliver