

## WHEELDON, John Murray (1929–2006)



### Commonwealth Parliament

*Senator, WA, 1965–81 (ALP)*

*Minister for Repatriation and Compensation, 1974–75*

*Minister for Social Security, 1975*

*Select Committee on the Container Method of Handling Cargoes, 1967–68*

*Printing Committee, 1967–69*

*Select Committee on Drug Trafficking and Drug Abuse in Australia, 1969–71*

*Committee of Privileges, 1967–71, 1976–81*

*Standing Committee on Regulations and Ordinances, 1969–74*

*Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, 1970–72*

*Select Committee on Securities and Exchange, 1970–75*

*Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, 1971–73*

*Estimates Committee A, 1973–74*

*Estimates Committee B, 1973–74*

*Library Committee, 1973–74*

*Select Committee on Civil Rights of Migrant Australians, 1973–74*

*Standing Orders Committee, 1973–74*

*Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, 1973–74, 1977–78, 1980–81*

*Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, 1973–75, 1976–80*

*Estimates Committee E, 1976, 1981*

*Estimates Committee F, 1976–78*

**I**NTELLECTUAL, LAWYER, ANTI-WAR PROTESTOR, Labor senator, journalist and 'Orwellian socialist with anarchist tendencies', John Murray Wheeldon was born on 9 August 1929 at Subiaco, Perth. He was the son of Murray Walter Wheeldon, bank official, and Marjorie Lillian, née Cartwright, nurse and daughter of Tom Cartwright, prominent unionist and founding president

of the Fremantle Trades Hall. Despite his maternal heritage, his early political direction was heavily influenced by his family's support for the Liberal Party. Wheeldon was educated at Perth Modern School (Bob Hawke and John Stone [q.v.4 Qld] were contemporaries), and the University of Western Australia, where he majored in philosophy, graduating in 1953 with a BA (Hons). In 1952 he led the Western Australian debating team at the intervarsity championships. While studying, he was an articled clerk with Parker & Parker, Barristers, Solicitors and Notaries, and in 1952 he entered practice as a solicitor. With a particular interest in industrial law, he represented such groups as the Rope and Twinemakers' Union.

Shortly after leaving school, Wheeldon began his political life as an inaugural member of the Young Liberal Movement, and was acting state president by the age of twenty. Although he made a name for himself during the 1949 federal election campaign, the Liberal victory did not strengthen his attachment to the party. He was critical of the Menzies–Fadden Government's unsympathetic attitude to decolonisation, and he was shaken by the Communist Party Dissolution Act, which he saw as contrary to liberal principles.<sup>1</sup>

In 1951 Wheeldon resigned from the Liberal Party and 'walked over to the Trades Hall' to introduce himself to F. E. ('Joe') Chamberlain, secretary of the state ALP, and offered to join the party. Within a year he was secretary of the moribund Claremont–Nedlands branch, delegate to the district council and a member of the party's state executive, of which he was junior vice-president in 1964. He served on the executive regularly until 1979, and was a delegate to ALP federal conferences in 1959, 1961 and 1965. The oratorical skills that became a hallmark of his Senate career were refined in these years, as he argued on such subjects as a 'uniform Party platform' throughout Australia and a revision of the party's 'colourless, ambiguous, uninspiring' objective. At this time he was identified with the party's left wing, and strongly opposed Gough Whitlam's advocacy of state aid for church schools.<sup>2</sup>

On 17 May 1963 Wheeldon married Mary Macdonald Roberts, a medical practitioner, who had been active in the South African Labour Party. The couple lived in Nedlands and had two children. In 1970, after the marriage ended in divorce, John married Judith Tanya Werner, née Shaw, with whom he had formed a relationship in the United States during an anti-war speaking tour with Jim Cairns in 1967. Judith's application for a migration visa to Australia was rejected in March 1968 on the advice of ASIO. Her parents were American communists and she was involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement. Prime Minister John Gorton [q.v. Vic.] dismissed ASIO's objections and she was granted a visa. Doubtless this increased the mutual regard that existed between Wheeldon and Gorton. Judith Wheeldon was later headmistress of Queenwood School in Mosman, and of Abbotsleigh in Wahroonga, New South Wales. John and Judith had one child.<sup>3</sup>

Standing for the Senate in 1964, Wheeldon was placed second on the ballot paper ahead of sitting member Joe Cooke [q.v. WA]. He was elected to the Senate on 5 December 1964, and sworn on 17 August 1965, the youngest senator at the time. Apart from his formidable powers of expression, Wheeldon was noted for his ‘encyclopaedic knowledge of foreign affairs’, his concern for justice, his capacity to promote causes and his ‘knowledge, appreciation and perspective of history’. He was a vocal and active opponent of United States and Australian intervention in Vietnam and defended protestors against government law and order campaigns. Highly charismatic and witty, and renowned for his ‘vitriolic tongue’, Wheeldon attracted media interest. A political eclectic, he was not easy to pigeonhole. The *Bulletin* once characterised him as ‘Federal Parliament’s one true internationalist ... its leading dilettante and gadfly, a man studiously uninterested in mundane concerns like petrol prices or income tax, his sights fixed on the global issues of democracy and human rights’.<sup>4</sup>

It was unusual to have a senator who was fluent in French and German, who regularly read *Le Monde* and *Zukunft*, and who consumed up to five books a week—mainly about foreign affairs and philosophy. In 1975 Wheeldon’s staff observed that he could ‘wake in the morning and act like an English social realist philosopher, move into the realms of absurdist humor and finish the day deep in existentialist thought’. Fun was not unimportant, and he enjoyed wearing a Mickey Mouse wristwatch in the chamber. He declared that the Fraser Coalition Government, which won the December 1975 election, should be called ‘the Liberal–National Country Party–AMP Society coalition’ in recognition of the role played by the big insurance companies against Labor.<sup>5</sup>

The breadth of Wheeldon’s intellectual scope was apparent in the 1972 debate on drug reform arising from the report of the Select Committee on Drug Trafficking and Drug Abuse in Australia. Wheeldon, one of a number of senators who delivered a minority report, argued for the legalisation of marijuana. Drawing on the failure of penal provisions in seventeenth-century England against the use of tobacco, mid-nineteenth-century Manchester folklore on alcohol and the United States Volstead Act of 1919, he told the Senate that before a law can be justified, it should be necessary ‘to establish that it is a proper interest of the State to regulate such activities’, and that ‘the onus’ should be upon ‘those who wish to prohibit the drug to justify its prohibition’. Further, it ‘ought to be considered ... whether in fact the law is enforceable ... [and] whether the social cost of the prohibition of some action may not be greater than the harm which results, or could result’.<sup>6</sup>

Similar principles led him to challenge government censorship of literature and film. In 1968 the Minister for Customs and Excise, Senator Scott [q.v. WA], accused him of ‘continually ... asking questions about dirty films being shown in Australia’. Wheeldon, who believed Australia had ‘ludicrously

oppressive censorship laws', spoke in the Senate about the censorship, or banning, of publications such as *Woroni*, the newspaper of the Australian National University Students' Association, Norman Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and Richard Lester's satirical movie, *How I Won the War*.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the ALP's electoral success in December 1972, Labor remained in a minority in the Senate. In the first six months Wheeldon spoke rarely, but on 14 March he objected strongly to what he called a 'flagrant abuse of the [Senate] rules' concerning the left-wing journalist Wilfred Burchett. Burchett had issued a writ against Senator Kane [q.v. NSW] for defamation. Wheeldon argued that because the writ had not been dealt with it was inappropriate that the Liberal Party 'should move a motion in the Senate to blackguard the man who is party to the action against the DLP senator [Kane]. This is dragging the reputation of this Parliament through the gutter'.<sup>8</sup>

Wheeldon chaired the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence between 1973 and 1975. He strongly believed that a government could not have a 'successful domestic policy unless [it had] a successful foreign policy'. He opposed colonialism, indeed 'anybody's imperialism', and advocated a foreign policy that would be 'more distinctively Australian and not dependent on decisions made in Washington or somewhere else'. Wheeldon believed that a 'commitment to democracy and human rights should imbue our view of the world—both because it's morally right and is in our own interests'.<sup>9</sup>

The committee began its first inquiry in August 1973, investigating the possibility of an Omega navigation station being built in Australia. The Omega report, tabled in May 1975, endorsed the facility's construction, though Wheeldon was among those members submitting a dissenting report. From November 1977 he chaired a subcommittee on human rights in the Soviet Union. Tabled in 1979, the committee's report reflected Wheeldon's dedication to civil liberties and passion for foreign affairs, and included comprehensive examinations of the persecution of religious groups, dissidents and ethnic minorities. Among its recommendations were suggestions that Australia should send observers to Soviet political trials, and seek to persuade the Soviet Government to release many political prisoners before the 1980 Moscow Olympics.<sup>10</sup>

Wheeldon's sophisticated understanding of foreign affairs and history was apparent during a November 1973 debate on the Prime Minister's visit to China and Japan, when he referred to the error of the Western habit of referring to 'the Communist bloc'. He attacked the statement by Senator McManus [q.v. Vic.] that Whitlam's diplomatic overtures to China were aligning Australia with the Chinese People's Republic, and pointed to the irony of the Opposition's accusations that the Government was 'a front' for the Chinese Communist Party without first retracting similar accusations made earlier regarding the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. To be a 'front' for these mutually hostile parties would be, he said, 'a remarkable feat which even

Houdini would have been incapable of performing'. Furthermore, he observed that the Democratic Republic of [North] Vietnam had pursued an 'independent line', having closer relations with the Soviet Union than with China, so it was erroneous to continue referring to North Vietnam as a puppet of China. In recognising China, the Australian Government had recognised that China was a powerful country with whom it was essential for Australia to establish close relations. With the interests represented by the National Party in mind, he concluded by asking the Opposition whether they opposed a trade agreement with China. Did they believe that Australia should not engage in substantial wheat sales to one-third of the world's population?<sup>11</sup>

After the 1974 double dissolution, Wheeldon was appointed Minister for Repatriation and Compensation. A journalist noted the irony that, in Opposition, Wheeldon and others on the left in the ALP had joked that should Labor ever be elected, Whitlam if leader, would probably make 'ALL' of them Minister for Repatriation. The *Australian Financial Review* suggested that in view of Wheeldon's lack of military service and opposition to the Vietnam War, 'there must be considerable doubts about a Prime Ministerial appointment which singles out such a senator to be what is often referred to as "the Minister for the RSL"'.<sup>12</sup>

From June to November 1975, Wheeldon also served as Minister for Social Security. Although failing to establish a National Compensation Scheme—which, in his words, was 'the last socialist measure to be proposed by a federal Labor government'—Wheeldon achieved the passage of legislation that raised both civilian and service pensions; increased the weekly allowance for the children of pensioners, and lowered the age at which the means test was abolished from seventy-five to seventy and later to sixty-five years.<sup>12</sup>

Wheeldon's principal responsibility in the social security portfolio was to push through the final stages of the Medibank scheme. As the main enabling legislation for Medibank had been passed at the historic joint sitting in August 1974, and Medibank had begun operations on 1 July 1975, he might have expected to oversee the smooth implementation of the legislation. However, those opposed to the scheme continued to resist fiercely, and Wheeldon found himself under persistent attack in Parliament and public forums. He was in the difficult position of replacing Bill Hayden who had worked long and hard on the scheme while minister and, although now Treasurer, retained responsibility for pushing through the last effective area of stonewalling, hospital agreements. Thus Wheeldon had neither the full carriage of the legislation, nor the experience and alliances formed by Hayden to smooth his path. In such a testing situation, Wheeldon's weaknesses as a minister were exposed. More comfortable with the grand sweep of foreign policy and human rights than the unrelenting financial and administrative detail of Social Security, Wheeldon was, as Peter Walsh [q.v.4 WA] put it, 'never noted for his diligence', and he gave 'a very free hand' to his principal private secretary, Dr Jim

Anthony. Anthony's ambitious schemes to create and head a new department responsible for compensation and the non-health parts of Social Security were thwarted when Wheeldon belatedly withdrew support for the plan. Anthony publicly attacked Wheeldon in scathing terms and was promptly sacked. As the 'loans' scandal unfolded in the latter half of 1975, Wheeldon recognised that Labor's days in government were probably numbered, and he was seized with a sense of urgency to cut through normal procedures in order to ensure that Medibank would be unassailable should the coalition achieve office. To that end Wheeldon was 'characteristically more cavalier with caucus' than Hayden had ever been. He worked closely with Dr John Deeble, co-author of the Medibank scheme, 'operating at the very limits of what was permissible' both in policies and the ways in which those policies were implemented.<sup>13</sup>

During the crisis that ended in the Government's dismissal from office, Wheeldon was one of several colleagues who unsuccessfully counselled caution rather than Whitlam's preferred method of confronting the Senate over its failure to pass the Supply Bill. In a brief memoir, he drily recounted his experience of the Dismissal: 'At 2.15 pm on the 11th November 1975 I was responsible for the payment of unemployment benefits, and at 2.20 pm I was unemployed myself'. Re-elected in the 1975 election, he was bitterly critical of Whitlam, who had sought to obtain election funds from the Ba'ath Socialist Party of Iraq. Wheeldon resigned from the shadow cabinet over the issue. In 1977 he supported Bill Hayden in an abortive leadership coup.<sup>14</sup>

Towards the end of his parliamentary career, Wheeldon was made parliamentary adviser to the United Nations General Assembly in New York. His decision not to stand again for the Senate, when his term ended on 30 June 1981, at the relatively young age of fifty-two, was motivated by several factors. His family life was disrupted by frequent travel between Perth and Canberra and he no longer felt there was 'any great cause being argued in the Federal Parliament with which I'm sufficiently interested to warrant spending the sort of life I am living'. The 'differences between the major political parties' had, he said, 'become very blurred'. Increasingly, he disagreed with aspects of his party's foreign policy, especially in his support of Israel and East Timor. Wheeldon was openly critical of Labor policies not to support Australian and American participation in a multinational peacekeeping force in Sinai. He also rejected Labor's opposition to US intervention in El Salvador. His democratic internationalist values were intact but he believed the world geopolitical balance had shifted. He said it had become clear to him over the past several years that the Soviet Union was an imperialist power and that 'the danger it poses is greater than any other dangers'. He considered the United States to be 'the principal obstacle to Soviet expansion'.<sup>15</sup>

In September 1981, after an approach by Rupert Murdoch, Wheeldon took up an appointment with News Ltd as associate editor of the *Australian*, and was chief editorial writer from 1981 to 1995. He also joined the board of

the conservative *Quadrant* magazine, contributing articles on a wide range of international and historical topics. In 1982 he reported on revolutionary situations in El Salvador and Nicaragua, where ‘restlessly curious and multi-lingual’, he explored hot spots and would argue and debate with anyone. In 2003 his name was in the news again when it was revealed that, together with Liberals Peter Coleman and Tony Abbott, he had been a trustee of a fund named Australians for Honest Politics established in 1998 in order to oppose Pauline Hanson’s One Nation Party.

Considered ‘one of the brightest minds to grace the Labor Party’, Wheeldon died in Sydney on 24 May 2006 and was accorded a state funeral, held on 2 June 2006 at Macquarie Park Crematorium, North Ryde.

Labor veteran Jim McClelland [q.v. NSW] considered Wheeldon a verbal pyrotechnist and ‘the most intellectually stimulating man in the parliament’, while John Faulkner [q.v.5 NSW] believed that Wheeldon ‘did not apply his extraordinary talents with discipline and dedication’ and that he had not fulfilled his political promise. Perhaps, as Kim Beazley junior said, Wheeldon was ‘never completely comfortable’ in Parliament, and party politics was too confining for a heterodox thinker with ‘an absolute determination ... to speak his own mind’. In later life he continued to surprise and provoke. Writing in 1996, by which time he had long been identified with conservative causes, Wheeldon declared that he remained ‘a socialist. Although I thus belong to an almost extinct species, I stand convinced that deregulated privatised capitalism is intrinsically incapable of dealing with the horrors increasingly besetting humanity’.<sup>16</sup>

*Bobbie Oliver*