

Dyed-in-the-wool Labor luminary at state, federal level

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Clyde Holding (middle) with Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke.

ALLAN CLYDE HOLDING
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CLYDE Holding, the former Victorian Labor opposition leader who went on to be a key minister in the Hawke federal Labor government, has died at a nursing home in Castlemaine after being diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease some years ago. He was 80.

As minister for Aboriginal affairs in the Hawke government from 1983-1987, Holding ushered Aboriginal land rights on to the national agenda, oversaw the handing back of Uluru to its original owners, and was responsible for having Charlie Perkins, the famously outspoken Aboriginal activist, appointed secretary for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the first indigenous Australian to head a federal government department.

Holding's commitment to social justice marked him out as a courageous and determined MP who was committed to achieving real change.

Former politician Graham Richardson, in his 1994 autobiography *Whatever It Takes*, wrote of Holding: "I don't know what goes on at Richmond Town Hall [referring to Holding's seat as a state MP], but I do know that whatever is taught, the school produces graduates that are tough, resourceful and utterly ruthless."

By the time Holding was elected to the House of Representatives in 1977, as member for the seat of Melbourne Ports, he had been Victoria's opposition leader for a frustrating 10 years, notably campaigning on the new federal policy of supporting state aid to non-government schools. It was a policy that deeply divided the Victorian ALP; Holding was forced to

repudiate the policy by Gough Whitlam, who was determined to reform the Victorian branch as a precondition to winning a federal election.

Holding resigned as opposition leader after the 1976 election, defeated Simon Crean to win Labor preselection for Melbourne Ports, and lobbied hard to get the numbers for Hawke to be elected leader of the federal Labor Party. When Hawke won government in the 1983 election, Holding could have chosen a ministry from several portfolios, but opted for Aboriginal affairs, which was famous for being the one no one ever wanted. The choice was typical of Holding, who since his early days as a student, lawyer and politician, had a strong social conscience and the desire to bring about change for those whom he saw as marginalised or unfairly treated.

The son of Irish immigrants, Holding grew up impoverished. His father was a government security officer on the wharves, and he began his education at Hawthorn Central, then won a scholarship to Trinity Grammar School. He joined the ALP as a law student at Melbourne University, and became secretary of Young Labor in Victoria. As a lawyer specialising in industrial accidents, he was one of the co-founders of the law firm Holding, Ryan and Redlich (now Holding Redlich).

As a member of the Victorian opposition, he protested against the hanging of Ronald Ryan, the last man to be legally executed in Australia in 1967, and was arrested at the protest. He recounted with great mirth that at the police station he was first asked his name and his occupation. After he replied that he was a lawyer and politician, the officer asked him whether he could read and write.

By the time he entered federal politics in 1977, he had long been on the fringes of mainstream national politics; he appears, for example, in the famous image (above) flanked by Whitlam and Hawke after Labor won the 1972 election.

He soon became a fixture on the national scene as minister for Aboriginal affairs as he introduced legislation for uniform national land rights, the centrepiece of ALP policy. But he was ultimately thwarted by the Labor premier of Western Australia, Brian Burke, who objected to national land rights, and Hawke, scared off by the powerful WA mining and pastoral industries. The proposal was dropped.

This may have been the end of Holding's close relationship with Hawke, but it had put Aboriginal land rights firmly on the national agenda, and the courts would later finish his work with the 1992 Mabo decision. Holding had been a close observer of Eddie Mabo's long and trying case, and at critical points had approved funding for the case to continue, despite the federal government being a defendant in the case.

He was also the first minister to insist on the repatriation of Aboriginal human remains from museums, travelling personally to the British Museum in London, and was a tireless advocate for the advancement of Aboriginal artists.

One of his proudest achievements in office was the handing back of the freehold title deeds to the traditional owners of Uluru in 1985, an event that occurred, as ever, in the face of strong opposition, this time from the Northern Territory government. He was also able to convince the then governor-general, Sir Ninian Stephen, to attend the handover against the advice of others in government.

A former adviser from that time says Holding travelled to Ayers Rock, as it was then known, 14 or 15 times between late 1983 and 1985, to oversee discussions with the area's traditional

owners. He was adamant that they maintain majority representation on the management board, even though the Department of Environment had traditionally been in charge of national parks. The appointment of Perkins as secretary of the department was also a major achievement, given that Hawke, of all people, was concerned Perkins would be "too outspoken" for the role.

Also in 1985, Holding, reflecting a cause that was close to his heart, established Labor friends of Israel, and today there is a forest named after him in that country.

After he was moved off the Aboriginal affairs portfolio in 1987, Holding became, briefly, minister for employment services and youth affairs, then transport and communications support, and immigration, local government and ethnic affairs. Having always been a passionate advocate for the arts, he fought against the forces of economic rationalism at a time when cultural and arts institutions were being measured in terms of actual floor space to determine their "value". He made sure institutions such as the National Film and Sound Archive and Film Australia were able to survive and thrive, as well as championing contemporary artists, and lobbied hard to see the National Museum of Australia established.

Among his successes, most notable was the appointment of Betty Churcher as the second director of the National Gallery. This was yet another decision made in the face of controversy, as Churcher was considered an outsider, and had not even originally applied for the role. As it turned out, she would remain in the role for seven years, and oversee some of the gallery's most successful exhibitions and acquisitions.

As minister for territories, he insisted that Canberra would have self-government, a decision that Canberrans are still divided over today.

Holding was dropped from the ministry after the 1990 elections, and remained in the House as a backbencher until he retired in 1998.

He is remembered by former colleagues as tough-minded but loyal, a talented parliamentary performer who had abiding faith in the Labor Party and in the role of Parliament, as well as respect for his opponents. When travelling as a minister, he always made a point of involving local members; having been in state politics for so long, he well remembered what smaller-scale politics was like. He was an engaging boss, who took an interest in his staff and made them feel that they were contributors, rather than cogs in a machine. He was also a man with wide ranging knowledge and complex tastes in arts and music.

He is survived by his second wife, the artist Judy (nee Crump), their daughter Isabella, his first wife Margaret (nee Sheer), their children Peter, Jenny and Danny, and four grandchildren.