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OBITUARY

THE HONOURABLE DR DONALD JAMES
GRIMES AO

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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Born Albury, NSW, 4 October 1937;

Died Launceston, Tasmania, 20 November 2021

Australian Medical Practitioner; Senator for Tasmania; Federal Minister and Australian Ambassador; advocate on disability; women refugees; Australia's Response to HIV and community and aged services

Born on 4 October 1937, Don Grimes grew up in Albury, close to the Bonegilla Migrant Camp. His father Walter John Grimes was a fitter and turner with NSW Government Railways. Grimes was the elder of two children born to Walter Grimes and his wife Nancy (née O'Neill).

Don Grimes was educated at Albury High School 1949-1952 when he moved to stay with an aunt at Waitara in Sydney to complete his school education at Fort Street Boys' High School (1952-4). In the NSW Leaving Certificate in 1954 he gained an A pass in English and economics and B passes in French, mathematics and physics. He missed out on a Commonwealth Scholarship.¹ However, he proved himself outstanding in sports, including gymnastics, water polo and football, where his prowess was on display in the second row in the First-Grade Rugby team in 1953 and the second-grade

¹ *The Fortian*, December 1955, 7-8.

team in 1954. His school days coincided with his mother's death from bowel cancer.

Grimes proceeded to University of Sydney in 1955 to fulfil a dream to become a medical practitioner inspired by his mother's illness and death. At the university he pursued junior rugby league for North Sydney and Australian Rules football for Sydney University.² He undertook his clinical training at Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney. After graduation in 1961 he elected to take up his residency at Royal Hobart Hospital. He believed that, in Sydney, professional advancement then favoured graduates with family medical connections. He later expanded his experience in general medical practice on the west coast of Tasmania; on Flinders Island; and in the Huon Valley. This led to a period of general practice at Legana, in northern Tasmania.

In 1960 Grimes married Margaret ('Meg') Schofield, with whom he later had four children. With Meg, he left Tasmania in 1965 to accept appointment in London as in-house medical practitioner for Beaverbrook Newspapers. Eventually, with their children, two sons and two daughters, Grimes returned to Launceston to open a new GP practice in the Launceston suburb of Riverside. Although other opportunities would take him elsewhere, his home became Launceston, where his family basically resided, and his most important political opportunities were soon to arise.

² R. Sullivan, "Crimes, Donald James", *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate*, (2017).

Grimes' disapproval of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and his support for Bill Hayden's proposal for Medibank as a revamped national health system, led to his joining the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in Launceston. He was quickly recognised as a potential candidate, for a parliamentary seat. In 1974 he won the third place on the ALP Senate ticket for Tasmania. Although this was an unwinnable position at the time, the State Attorney-General, Mervyn Everett stood aside to ensure that Grimes would be elected. He was duly elected to the Senate in the federal double dissolution election of 1974. In 1975, after the defeat of the Whitlam Government, Grimes turned to federal parliamentary opportunities.

In 1976, he was elected to Whitlam's shadow ministry with responsibility for social security concerns.³ When the ALP won government in the 1983 federal election, Grimes was appointed Minister for Social Security in the Hawke Government and Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate. In the following year, he was appointed to the new ministerial position as Minister for Community Services. However, health problems arose for him and in August 1985 he underwent a coronary bypass operation and took a break from ministerial duties.⁴

Much of Grimes' experience in medical policy was developed between 1975 and 1983 during his period in opposition from where he addressed significant innovative areas, including: disability, ethnic affairs, handicap and Aboriginal disadvantage. In opposition, he also championed the community of Greek Australians whose members had become involved in the so-called "Greek

³ *The Canberra Times*, 30 January 1976.

⁴ *The Canberra Times*, 8 August 1985.

social security conspiracy case". He was respected in the Federal Parliament with friendships extending across party lines. He was the only federal minister to appoint an all female staff. The head of office was Netta Burns, a respected ALP figure in her own right. Although he declined to join a faction in the ALP, he did participate in meetings of the Socialist International, alongside Germany's Willy Brandt; Sweden's Olof Palme; Britain's Neil Kinnock; and New Zealand's Helen Clark. In such company, he held his own.

As a Minister, Grimes drew on his experience in medical practice and hospital administration in helping to pilot the strategy adopted by Australia in the 1980s to reduce the spread of HIV and AIDS. As Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate, he worked closely with Federal Health Minister, Dr Neal Blewett, to build an inclusive and bold response around care, treatment, research and prevention. He helped to assemble a broad coalition of Members and Senators from all political parties to support and develop a distinctive Australian approach to HIV. His clinical expertise was invaluable in working with the medical profession. In Cabinet, Grimes' advocacy on HIV/AIDS carried great weight with Prime Minister Hawke and his Ministerial colleagues. Subsequently, he continued his involvement and interest in the progress of the Australian and global responses to HIV/AIDS. These, in turn, in more recent years, have influenced Australian strategies to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Ironically, homosexual offences were to last longest in his own State, Tasmania, until 1997 when a combination of

international moves, federal legislation and deft political action led to the repeal of the provisions of the Tasmanian State criminal law.⁵

By October 1986, Grimes' health problems recurred and he announced that he would not be seeking re-election to the Senate. He was then appointed by the Hawke Government as Australian ambassador to the Netherlands.⁶ He held this ambassadorial appointment for five years. By that time, his first marriage had been dissolved. He went on to marry for a second time, Helen Knight but this marriage too ended in divorce. At the official residence in The Hague, true to his democratic instincts, Grimes permitted the embassy staff to use the Ambassador's tennis court, a privilege that had been denied by predecessors.

A third marriage was formalised in January 1991 towards the end of Grimes' posting in The Netherlands. He married Esther Timmermans, originally a Netherlands national; later an Australian citizen. He returned to Australia with her and re-commenced living in Sydney. In January 1992 he was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia and in May 1992 he was appointed chairman of the Australian National Council on AIDS.⁷ Out of recognition for his extensive engagement with the AIDS pandemic and his significant experience in health and hospital administration, he was appointed to the additional State post as chairman of the South Eastern Sydney Area Health Service. He held that position until 2003.

⁵ *Criminal Code (Tas)1924*, s 122.

⁶ "Hague Post for Grimes", *The Canberra Times*, 29 May 1987, 3.

⁷ *The Canberra Times*, 13 May 1992.

Still thirsting for other engagements that could utilise his experience in medical policy and hospital administration, Grimes accepted appointments as director of oncology at the Gleneagles International Hospital (Kuala Lumpur) (1992-3) and as chairman of AusHealth International (1997-2003). His extensive involvement with public health administration was recognised by his appointments as a Fellow of Royal Australian College of Medical Administrators (1998) and as a Fellow of the Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine (FAFBHM).

Grimes' post in Bahrain was special as it involved becoming chief health advisor to the Health Minister of Bahrain (2004-5). The Minister was a Sunni Muslim woman. Grimes established a busy life there with his third wife, Esther, until she developed breast cancer from which she died in 2011.

Thereafter, Don Grimes tired of life in Sydney, where there were too many memories of happy years with Esther. Instead, after her death, he returned to his home in Launceston to be closer to his children. He revived an earlier acquaintance with classical and jazz music. He spent much time with friends and former staff. He was a congenial man who cherished his friendships. In February 2021, with Australia in the midst of the new COVID pandemic, he was hospitalised following the first of several strokes. That process continued and finally brought his life to a close on 20 November 2021. He was survived by his four children and other family, mostly living in Tasmania.

Don Grimes tackled many difficulties and varied challenges. His mother's early death committed him to the profession of medicine. His sense of public engagement took him to the Federal Parliament, election as Senator and

appointment to new and challenging ministerial posts. An assignment, with great success, as Ambassador also brought new challenges. Subsequent engagements in health administration followed; and ultimately a return to quiet years, before the end.

Looking back, it appears that the unnamed commentator on his prowess in first grade football at Fort Street High School in 1953 correctly estimated his core qualities. He was, it was said, “tenacious, barging forward, always gaining ground”.

Michael Kirby and Patti Warn