



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**THE SENATE**  
**ADJOURNMENT**

**John Cummins**

**SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 5 September 2006**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

---

## SPEECH

<p><b>Date</b> Tuesday, 5 September 2006  <b>Page</b> 96  <b>Questioner</b>  <b>Speaker</b> Marshall, Sen Gavin</p>	<p><b>Source</b> Senate  <b>Proof</b> No  <b>Responder</b>  <b>Question No.</b></p>
---	---

**Senator MARSHALL** (Victoria) (7.33 pm)—Tonight I rise to pay tribute to an inspirational leader of working men and women. ‘Dare to struggle. Dare to win. If you don’t fight, you lose’ was the often-used catchcry by which John Cummins lived a life dedicated to the working class and to the underdog. He certainly did dare to struggle, and he most definitely dared to win. John Cummins died aged 58, after a 12-month battle with cancer, last Tuesday, 29 August 2006. John Cummins, who was affectionately known as Cummo, was a key strategist in the union movement and the president of the Victorian Branch of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union. Like many others, he became part of the CFMEU when it amalgamated with the former Builders Labourers Federation.

John was born to parents Mary and Jack and grew up in Melbourne’s inner north. He supported the Fitzroy Lions until the club was sold to Brisbane. Attending Parade College, he played football for his school and captained their firsts team in his final year. John went on to a tertiary education, and struggles of the times brought profound changes to John’s outlook and ambitions. Working in blue-collar jobs like the production line at Northcote Pottery accelerated these changes. So it was no surprise when he rejected a career in teaching and looked to a more radical political and working life. He began working in the building industry in 1972, immediately joining the Builders Labourers Federation, an organisation which he remained an active and influential member of until it amalgamated with the CFMEU in 1994.

John worked as a labourer and a scaffolder on some prominent jobs in Melbourne, including Collins Place and the Westgate Bridge, where he became a union activist. His determination and considerable skills on the job came to be noticed as he gained the position of organizer for the BLF in Melbourne. His next stint was in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, where he succeeded the late Jim Bacon as an organiser in 1980. As most would know, Jim was later to become the Premier of Tasmania. John’s wife, Dianne, and young son, Mick, made the move to the remote area with him. It was a wild time there during the last big minerals boom, and the industrial climate put the calm, self-reliant young organiser under extreme pressure. He thrived on the challenge and became a popular and effective organiser. It was during this time in the west that his second son, Shane, was born.

John Cummins quickly became a respected mentor in the construction industry as his experience grew. A favourite piece of advice from him was to ‘stop sooking’ and ‘you’re only as good as your last blue’. Although this was often said in jest, his work exemplified the truth contained in it. He returned to Melbourne and took up organising in the increasing rough and tumble of an industry under pressure from the Fraser Liberal government. His work continued under the Hawke Labor government and he worked even harder throughout the deregistration of the BLF and the de-recognition of the union by the Cain government in 1986. Cummo stood up to the police harassment of workers. He was prosecuted for trespassing on sites and imprisoned for these activities and for breaching court orders. Many times he was physically removed from site by police but continued to return to service union members. As Cummo explained why he was in jail to his sons, ‘I reckon if I don’t tell the judge how to do his job then he shouldn’t tell me how to do mine.’

John Cummins led by example, helping other BLF members resist the intimidation tactics. He was integral to the BLF resistance to the assault on the union, and many construction workers saw him as the front line. However, in the early 1990s, faced with a second five-year deregistration of the BLF, Cummo and other BLF members around Australia were forced to choose between continuing to fight an increasingly onerous battle on their own or amalgamating with the new CFMEU, a union which included its old political and industrial rivals, the Building Workers Industrial Union. Cummo and those supporting amalgamation won the argument, and the merger took place in 1994. CFMEU organiser and former BLF official John Setka recalls many in the labour movement were surprised at Cummo’s willingness to be a part of the team with people who had been opposed to him. John Setka asked him once how he could forgive people who had fought hard against him in the past and he said, ‘You can’t hold it against them for being loyal to their union.’ John had the ability to rise above the personal if it was in the best interest of the workers.

In 1996 Cummo was elected President of the Victorian branch of the CFMEU. In this role John played a major part in building a strong team under a new leadership drawn from all parts of the new union. As part of this team, Cummo played an influential and positive role in developing the wages policy and strategies that saw wage increases, shorter hours and improved long service leave entitlements for Victorian construction workers. Like salt and pepper, he was in everything. The success was ongoing and it resulted in the Howard government singling out the CFMEU for special attention in the form of legislative attacks. Cummo faced the Cole royal commission and conducted himself in the dignified but combative manner that such a politically motivated witch-hunt deserved.

Cummo will be remembered for his tenacity, principle and strategic brilliance. Few union officials could hold a candle to John at a mass meeting of workers. He was charming, charismatic and possessed a wicked sense of humour, with a collection of quotations and sayings to rival that of Chairman Mao. John loved a beer, a bet and the Fitzroy and North Heidelberg football clubs, and he loved the building industry. But most of all he loved his family.

We will mourn Cummo because he did so much for so many, without any fanfare. If someone died and there was no money for the funeral, John would raise the money. He looked after widows and he looked after the kids. And all this was separate from his official duties. He was right in the middle of the struggle against Howard's anti-union task force and legislation when he was struck down in July 2005 with a brain tumour. Cummo fought the illness for over 12 months and reached his 58th birthday on 26 August just before dying peacefully on the 29th, surrounded by his loved ones: Diane, Mick and Shane, and his brother Geoff, sister Jan and their families.

Although much has been said about Cummo's political life, he was also a private family man who enjoyed all the time he spent with his family. He particularly enjoyed going to the footy and watching his sons play at North Heidelberg. As with much in his life, he could not help but pitch in around the club. He was a regular, from ferrying the boys and their mates around to manning the canteen. Famously, when a young player asked for a Lift—actually a brand of soft drink—Cummo immediately grabbed his car keys and asked where the young lad needed to go. As a mark of his commitment to the club, they recently dedicated the John Cummins Room in his honour. He also enjoyed time with Di down at their holiday house away from the hustle and relentless bustle of the construction industry.

His memorial service yesterday was a testament to the man. Over 2,500 workers, friends, comrades and employers filled the Regent Theatre in Melbourne, which was saved by the BLF green bans of the 1970s. It was a great honour to farewell him alongside so many of our comrades and to be part of the collective tribute to such a hardworking example of the struggle of the labour movement. After the service the crowd marched behind the hearse back to Trades Hall, in which Cummo stopped the city for one last time. As Ralph Edwards, Acting President of the CFMEU and long-time friend of Cummo, said, 'We built this city and Cummo has a right to check out a bit of our handiwork on this, his last march.' While I do not claim to be a close personal friend of Cummo—a claim I wish I could make—he was a good comrade and someone I could always talk to and seek advice from. He was good counsel, always willing in his contribution.

John Cummins was the most respected unionist of this generation: an inspirational leader of construction workers, a mentor to many others and a man who served his union and the working class like few others ever have. He will be sorely missed in the continuing struggle against the conservatives and their latest wave of anti-union attacks. Vale John Cummins: dare to struggle, dare to win—if you don't fight, you lose. In Cummo's own words: 'You've done yourself a treat.'