

Melbourne Grand Prix supremo, businessman, Liberal Party member Ron Walker dies

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Ron Walker, hailed as a man who "loved Melbourne and Victoria" and who stole the Australian Grand Prix from Adelaide, has died at the age of 78.

Mr Walker was a prominent businessman who served the state in many roles, including as mayor and the head of the Melbourne Major Events Company which brought the Commonwealth Games to the city.

He was also the former chairman of Fairfax Media and a prominent member of the Liberal Party.

News of Mr Walker's death was tweeted by former prime minister Tony Abbott who said "Australia, Victoria and Melbourne have lost a great son with Ron Walker's passing".

"For decades not much happened in Melbourne without Ron being at the centre of things," he wrote.

"As well he was a great supporter of good causes, from medical research, to the Liberal Party, which he held together in tough times.

"He was a staunch friend and constant encouragement to successive Liberal leaders and will be much missed."

Former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett, a close friend, has also confirmed the passing of Mr Walker.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull praised Mr Walker as "a wise and true friend to me".

"We will not see his like again," he said.

Victorian Opposition leader Matthew Guy said Mr Walker's generosity touched many.

"Ron Walker loved Melbourne and Victoria," he said in a statement.

"His achievements helped put Victoria on the map.

"Australia is poorer for Ron's passing. My condolences to Barbara and all of his family."

He was praised as a "giant of Victorian cultural and political life" by Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews.

"Whether feared or revered, Ron was someone who you never forgot," he said.

"As chairman of the Victorian Major Events Corporation, Ron helped put Victoria back on the map — working to attract the biggest and the best events to Victoria.

"It's in great part thanks to Ron that we are now known as the sporting capital of the world."

Ron Walker was a man of big ideas, Federal Labor leader Bill Shorten said.

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Key points:

- Mr Walker, 78, was a wealthy businessman, who had cancer
- Brought Grand Prix, Commonwealth Games to Melbourne
- Served as Lord Mayor of Melbourne, chairman of Fairfax Media and treasurer of the Liberal Party



Malcolm Turnbull
@TurnbullMalcolm

Vale Ron Walker - a great Australian, magnificent Melburnian & ferociously committed Liberal. Ron was a wise and true friend to me as he was to so many Liberal leaders. We will not see his like again. Our hearts go out to Barbara and their family at this sad time.

6:59 PM - Jan 30, 2018

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"Modern Melbourne owes much to his vision and drive," he said in a tweet.

A wealthy businessman, Mr Walker was responsible for bringing the Grand Prix to Melbourne in 1993.

His contributions to the community and major events have seen him win several honours, including a Companion of the Order of Australia, a Centenary Medal and a Victoria of the Year.

While his name is synonymous with big business, big development and big money, Ronald Joseph Walker had more humble beginnings.

Born in Melbourne in 1939, he attended Caulfield Grammar School and started his first business in a Collingwood backyard making dishwashing detergents and washing cars.

His career went from strength to strength, as he built his fortune in the property and chemical industries and, in 1974, he was elected Melbourne's Lord Mayor.

He served on the council for three years, hosting sporting events and bringing music acts to Melbourne's Moomba Festival.



PHOTO: Mr Walker served as Lord Mayor of Melbourne for three years from 1974. (ABC News)

A success in business and politics



PHOTO: Fairfax Media chairman Ron Walker listens as the company's first-half results are announced in Sydney on Friday, February 23, 2009. (Paul Miller: AAP)

Mr Walker's political allegiances were clear.

He was a close friend of former Victorian premier Jeff Kennett and was the Liberal Party's National Treasurer from 1998 to 2003.

During that time he was also appointed as the head of the Australian Grand Prix Corporation after orchestrating the event's move to Albert Park.

Pinching Adelaide's race was a personal crusade for the self-confessed petrol head and classic car collector.

"I always thought it was a great mistake to not have the negotiating skills and the get up and go to secure it in the first place," he said.

"Recognising our Grand Prix as so important to this state, nothing would have stopped me in the end from securing it for this state."



Bill Shorten
@billshortenmp

Vale Ron Walker, a man of big ideas and great generosity. Modern Melbourne owes much to his vision and drive.

7:31 PM - Jan 30, 2018 · Melbourne, Victoria

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After that success, former Labor premier Joan Kirner appointed Mr Walker as the chairman of the Melbourne Major Events Company.

He travelled to more than 80 countries in search of events, adding the Bledisloe Cup, the 2006 Commonwealth Games and golf's President's Cup to his list of coups.

"Sometimes, I must admit, I'd wake up and wonder what I was doing in some of these countries," he said.

At the height of his public commitments, Mr Walker's business ventures also flourished.

The company he co-founded, Hudson Conway, was responsible for building Melbourne's Crown Casino.

He later sold his shares for a reported \$90 million, but continued to work in property development.

In 2015, his fortune was estimated at just under \$1 billion.

Mr Walker also had a keen interest in the media and he was appointed chairman of Fairfax in 2005.

But it was the beginning of a tumultuous period for the media giant and Mr Walker stood down in 2009 after losing the confidence of the Fairfax family.

Walker diagnosed with cancer

But Mr Walker's biggest challenge came in 2012.

After having a melanoma removed from his face, Mr Walker returned to work but was soon told his brain and body were riddled with cancer and he should prepare for the worst.

At the launch of the 2013 Grand Prix, Mr Walker's ghostly appearance shocked many. He would later say it was a mistake to attend.

But he refused to give up on life and, later that year, travelled to the US to take part in the trial of a new melanoma drug, Keytruda. It was a trip that would pay off in spades.

By the end of 2014, to the astonishment of his doctors, he was cancer free.

After winning his fight with cancer, Mr Walker pulled back from his very public life, and gave up his position with the Grand Prix.

He remained closely linked with cancer research, and claims his involvement in the trial of Keytruda, which is now used by 1,600 Australian cancer patients, was one of his greatest achievements.

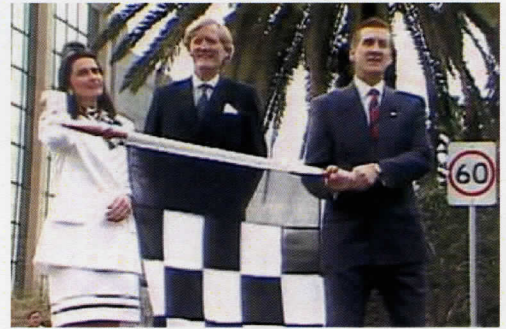


PHOTO: Mr Walker (centre) with Jeff Kennett, the former premier, as he starts the Grand Prix in 1996. (ABC News)

Topics: community-and-society, death, sport, motor-sports, melbourne-3000, vic

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