Australia's first minister for Environment and Conservation was a brilliant, bold and persuasive man who is remembered by his son as a scientist and a leader, an idealist and a visionary.

Remembering Moss Cass

Dan Cass
is an energy policy adviser at The Australia Institute.

I. Melbourne, 2022

We buried Moss last Sunday. I felt grounded shovelling dirt onto his coffin: he thought a lot about the earth, he loved to show his children and grandchildren how to garden. In my speech I said a political-hero father is hard to love but impossible to hate. It took me 51 years to write that.

We were distracted until the funeral, but now it is dark. The house is quiet and I wake needing to talk to Dad. To hear his lovely voice. To say something kind that makes his green eyes smile.

Dad honoured huge political promises but didn't keep all the personal ones. We never built furniture together when he retired from politics. He never took us to Japan. There is much he never revealed.

He was heartbroken for the planet and for people but there was something closer to home that also made him cry. I feel we failed to help him put down his heavy load.

He demonstrated a purposeful life. His luminous intelligence, honesty and passion for justice opened you. He could imagine a green and fair world and did as much as anyone to bring it about. He could talk politics and solve problems and believed everyone had something valuable to contribute.

He taught us that collaborative thinking is what we do. To live is to work it all out: how to care for each other and the planet.

II. Corrigin, c. 1935

When I think of my father's childhood I can feel the dust. Dad's parents' families migrated to Australia after the Białystok pogrom of June 1906. My grandparents – Ben Cass and Esther Robin – met and married in Perth.

My grandfather was colossal. A multilingual doctor, Ben read current affairs and did challenging operations in a solo country practice. He was a keen photographer and proud of his boys, the "three angels" promised to Esther by a Polish fortune teller.

One picture stands out in my memory. It is Corrigin, 140 miles from Perth. The year is about 1935. My father and his two younger brothers are arranged around a tiny birthday cake on a dark verandah. Moss holds his shoulders back. He glances at Alec and is captured breaking into laughter. Cecil is rigid but he too begins to grin. That gentle fraternity continued through the generations and holds us now.

When Dad was six, his father took him to watch an operation at Perth hospital. Sitting on Ben's shoulders, Moss was impressed. He would be called to assist in his father's surgery. The young brothers became compounding chemists in their father's home pharmacy and eventually all became distinguished surgeons.

As the poverty of the Great Depression was overshadowed by war and the Holocaust, history taught Moss that life was serious and politics mattered. The Casses were often the only Jews in the small towns they lived in.

Dad handed down his father's authority and trust. He taught his children and grandchildren how to think and act with confidence. To carefully hold a bread knife or a chainsaw or a new idea.

III. Melbourne, 1955

After graduating, Dad met Shirley Shulman, a vivacious, creative, intelligent young woman. He moved to Melbourne to marry her in 1955. Moss fell in love when he first set eyes on Mum. They were married for 67 years. Dad was a romantic; he said Mum was the most interesting person he knew. She challenged him to live the largest life he could.

Before politics, Moss was a scientist. He built Australia's first heart-lung machine. He helped develop open-heart surgery at Guy's Hospital, London. My parents lapped up London's political and cultural ferment. They mixed with the New Left and enjoyed shows. In 1957 my sister Naomi was born. They returned to Melbourne in 1959 and had my sister Deborah the next year.

Shirley is an artist and writer. She brought beautiful artefacts from travels to Moscow and Marrakech, Papua and Persia. My parents were too old to be the '60s generation, but they were icons of the zeitgeist. They bought into a co-op, smoked weed a couple of times, wore long hair and listened to folk music. When friends needed help, they moved in for months at a time. Dad developed his own photos, collected records, kept bees and bought a bike to ride to Parliament House. He fixed everything that broke. He always ate the scraps.

Mum and Dad hosted the best dinner parties. People stayed until he gently ushered them away, while she still talked. The conversation got to the heart of things, from the personal life of someone at the table, to history and culture, to our dying Earth.

Mum and Dad were dreamers and rebels. They had powerful imaginations working in different registers. Moss would carefully sneak up on a difficult truth; Shirley would ambush it with a joke.

IV. Kooyong, 1961

In his memoir, Moss and co-authors Vivien Encel and Anthony O'Donnell credit the barnstorming reforms of the Whitlam government with hard policy work done in the 1960s. Moss played a critical role in contentious debates, as both visionary and negotiator.

Moss and his comrades overturned the White Australia Policy and ensured Labor would oppose the Vietnam War. Moss drew on his family's medical wisdom to become an architect of universal healthcare through Medibank. He advocated decriminalising cannabis and replacing gross domestic product (GDP) with a measure of human flourishing. He advocated for gay law reform and directing funding away from wealthy private schools. He wanted the ABC to publish a newspaper. And on and on.

In 1964, Moss helped found a utopian experiment – the Trade Union Clinic and Research Center in Melbourne's west. Funded by the meatworkers, it pioneered an approach where medical and allied professionals collaborated with community workers to repair social conditions as well as wounds.

This process drove my father to move from policy and experiment to electoral politics. He knew unions and communities could never do enough. The solution was socialised healthcare for the nation. (Memo: salaried, not fee for service.)

In 1961 Dad ran against Menzies in Kooyong. His radical platform took more votes off the Liberal prime minister than anyone before. That was all the evidence he needed; honesty and courageous vision are the winning ticket.

V. Paris, 1974

In 1969 Moss won the sprawling western suburbs seat of Maribyrnong. I was born in 1970. When I was growing up and Dad was in Canberra I spent hours in his study, leafing through his papers, looking at his cameras and fountain pens, trying to imagine him and his habits. When I could read I consumed his ecological literature and it made me terrified of the future. He never forgave himself.

As Australia's representative at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's first conference of environment ministers, in Paris in 1974, Moss was calmly prophetic. He warned of global collapse and called for a new economics. Foreign Affairs had reviewed his speech and replaced "rich, overfed countries" and "poor, underfed countries" with euphemisms. Moss reversed the edits and said, "We have not inherited this earth from our parents ... We have borrowed it from our children."

When Moss became the first minister for Environment and Conservation in 1972, he quickly built a department but had no legislative authority. When his powerful Environmental Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act was ready for debate, he first took the unusual step of consulting with members of the opposition. It passed without amendment. It would later save Fraser Island from sand-mining and help restrain uranium mining in Kakadu.

In 1975, Moss became minister for the Media and he worked fast. He created community radio, built momentum for the Special Broadcasting Service and a press council. Moss's box of clippings from this period is ludicrous – page after page of stories. He took radical positions on a range of issues. Journalists were beguiled. No wonder the press barons hated him.

Moss was surprised to get into cabinet at 45. He attributed this to being outspoken in caucus. In each election from 1969 to 1974 his vote increased. More evidence for his science of hope: radical honesty wins votes; power

only matters if you do something bold.

VI. Love, now

Over recent years, as my father was affected by cancer, I saw the strength he drew from childhood. He was calm in the hands of doctors, stoic about treatment, adaptive as his body grew weak and calm before death. He intended to use Victoria's Voluntary Assisted Dying scheme but it is flawed and this hope of an easeful going was snatched from him.

Moss experienced grace in simple things, especially with his children and grandchildren. They cooked, picked his olives and shopped at the Queen Victoria Market with Shirley. He played with them as babies. He trusted us. In his garden, we forgot politics.

Moss's four adult granddaughters tell of how influential his idealism and Socratic method were. His gentle touch, his discourse, his pure love. If we cope today it is in work and that work is love.

A few months before he died, he cried. Nobody listens, he said, weakly shaking his fist. We always just wanted him to be at peace. To rediscover his joy of music or photography, or reminisce about good times we had as a family.

After I became a father to sons, I better understood Dad and his brothers. My sons taught me how to play. I understand more of Dad's pain now and wish I could have taken it away. Every day I channel Dad in my work, which I love. The primary challenge of our time is to replace fossil fuels with solar, wind and batteries. Our window of opportunity is closing fast. Australia must pass to the renewable age this decade so that future generations can make their own utopias. ●



Then Environment minister Moss Cass (left), with Jon Pratten, chairman of the Myall Lakes committee, aboard *The Viking*, at Mungo Brush on the Myall Lakes, NSW, in 1973. Stuart William MacGladrie / Fairfax Media