Costar, Brian. (25 July 2007). Social progressive who got the world to 'belt up'. The Age.

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I FIRST met Walter Jona under the grandstand at the Junction Oval on a wintry night in August 1985, at a meeting of the VFL Combined Supporters Association. He had formed the association in an attempt to democratise the VFL and to prevent the relocation of South Melbourne to Sydney. It was one of his few defeats in a long and admirable career.

Twenty years passed before I met him again. This time at an electorate office Christmas party, where I discovered he was writing his political memoirs. They were published last year titled People, Parliament and Politics. They are a substantial piece of political analysis and reflection - no surprise to those who knew of the substantial contribution he made to Victoria.

Jona, who has died of cancer at his Toorak home, was born not too far away in the family home in Hawthorn. His father, Jacob, was the local GP and had married Lily Wintner in 1922. Jona's grandparents had emigrated from Russia in the late 19th century to escape anti-Semitic persecution.

He attended Glenferrie Primary School and then Scotch College. In 1932, he became a junior member of the Hawthorn Football Club - his father was president - and went on to be a passionate member for 75 years.

At age seven he had already decided he wanted to be the member of parliament for Hawthorn and when he retired in 1985 he had become its longest serving member.

Jona matriculated in 1943 and the next year enrolled in first year medicine at Melbourne University. Later that year he followed the lead of his older sister, Anna, who had joined the Australian Women's Army Service, and volunteered for the RAAF. He served in north Queensland, but a brief sojourn in the south-west Pacific was terminated when it was discovered he was under-age for overseas service.

He returned to his university course in 1946, and in addition to medicine began studying political science, played football and cricket, and along with like-minded liberals Lindsay Thompson, Alan Hunt and Allen Missen, joined the University Liberal Club.

He began to have doubts about a medical career, failed to pass second year medicine, but continued for a time with an arts degree. After taking a position with the Royal Exchange Assurance Group, in 1953 he became an insurance consultant with the pharmaceutical company Nicholas Pty Ltd. He also became an active member of a wide range of community, Jewish and sporting groups, and the Liberal Party - associations he would retain throughout his life.

When the Liberal Party disendorsed the sitting member for Hawthorn in 1964, Jona defeated a strong field of 11 to gain preselection, then won the seat with 56 per cent of the final vote. His inaugural speech to the Legislative Assembly in
October 1964 displayed his liberal-inspired commitment to the role of education. Throughout his parliamentary career he engaged with all the schools in his electorate, primary or secondary, public or private. He supported the elevation of the Swinburne Technical College to a degree-granting institution and served on its council as well as the board of governors of Tel Aviv University in Israel.

The parliamentary Liberal Party in the 1960s was dominated by conservatives and Premier Henry Bolte was in no hurry to promote this young social progressive into the ministry. Jona's chance to distinguish himself came in 1967, when Bolte and his deputy, Arthur Rylah, responded to the appalling road toll by creating the all-party road safety committee, with Jona as chairman.

After an exhaustive 11-month inquiry, the committee recommended the fitting and compulsory wearing of seatbelts in all motor vehicles, but Bolte and Rylah feared that compulsion would be electorally unpopular and were strongly against it.

With cultivated assistance from the media, Jona deployed considerable political skill to force a reversal of policy. In 1970 Victoria became the first jurisdiction in the world to enforce the wearing of seatbelts. The idea spread across Australia and much of the world, and Jona is rightly credited with saving thousands of lives.

After a decade in Parliament, Jona became Australia's first minister for immigration and ethnic affairs, and was also made assistant minister of health. He was an enthusiastic multiculturist and Victoria was the first to give the concept statutory recognition.

Jona transferred to the ministry for community services after the 1979 election; he had charge of the prisons system and this was to embroil him in a major controversy. Then, as now, there are no votes in prison reform but the Hamer government was more proactive in the area than any of its predecessors.

Jona set out to professionalise the prison service and to upgrade run-down prisons. He was the minister who oversaw the final stages of the construction of the high-tech maximum security Jika Jika wing at Pentridge to replace the decaying H Division. Controversy came after Jona had retired, when inmates set fire to a section of the unit in 1987 and four died.

Jona was a person of integrity and commitment. He was deeply committed to his wife, Alwynne, whom he married in 1972, and who was an integral player in "Team Jona"; to his faith; to his community; to his party (but that didn't stop him criticising it); and last but certainly not least to the Hawthorn Football Club. He was an incredibly energetic and engaged citizen whose interests had few bounds - space does not permit even the listing of the organisations and groups in which he was an active participant.

He was a prominent member of those socially progressive liberals in the Hamer governments who revived the Deakinite tradition in the 1970s. He was given the Order of Australia in 1986 for services to the community and an honorary doctorate from Tel Aviv University in 1996. He is survived by Alwynne.

His state funeral will be held at Temple Beth Israel tomorrow.

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