

## **Press Association obituary by Chris Moncrieff**

Lord Ashley of Stoke, Jack Ashley, who was one of the most courageous and dogged MPs of the 20th century, spent most of his 26 years in the Commons in total deafness, yet remained a forceful and unique parliamentary and practical champion of disabled people and the underdog.

Some 25 years later, thanks to what he described as a miracle development in the curing of deafness, his hearing at least partially returned.

Lord Ashley was able to intensify his already-fiery crusading zeal, particularly in the areas of help for disabled people.

He was not afraid to vote against his own Labour government when he felt that disabled people were not being treated fairly or generously.

When deafness struck in 1968, only two years after he entered Parliament, he announced that he would be retiring from the House of Commons. But his friends in his Stoke South constituency and fellow MPs, Tory as well as Labour, persuaded him to carry on.

This he did and he demonstrated over the next 24 years how, with courage and skill, he could overcome a profound physical disability which many had feared would make it impossible for him to operate effectively, or at all, in the Commons.

But he proved the doubters wrong. He transformed campaigns into crusades and was the scourge of those who cause disability and unnecessary deaths.

Drug companies (relating to the thalidomide tragedy, for instance), the armed forces (bullying and nuclear testing), hospital and prison authorities ("filthy" kitchens) and legal eminences (battered wives) all felt the searing impact of Lord Ashley's relentless zeal to put right what he considered to be injustice.

His campaigning skills were unmatched and highly effective. And amid talk about idle MPs, Ashley was always a shining example of how a backbench member could and should occupy his time.

His activities in this area tended to overshadow his other parliamentary work. He was on the right wing of the Labour party and was, in fact, the only Labour MP to fully support Barbara Castle's doomed In Place of Strife White Paper on industrial relations.

Ashley was one of that dwindling species of Labour MP, one who had actually earned a living by manual work. He started out in adult life as a crane driver, a furnace stoker and a coal heaver.

Jack Ashley was born in Widnes on December 6 1922. His father was a Lancashire labourer who died when Jack was five, leaving his mother, an office cleaner, with four children to rear.

He attended St Patrick's School, Widnes and left to become a coal heaver, being paid 12s 6d a week. Ashley also managed to persuade his landlord to knock 40% off the rent because their family home had a leaky roof.

Later he went to Ruskin College, Oxford and Gonville and Caius, Cambridge and was elected to Widnes Council at the age of 22, the youngest borough councillor in Great Britain.

Ashley served for a year as a driver in the Royal Army Service Corps on the outbreak of war but was discharged on health grounds. In 1946 he was on the national executive of the Chemical Workers' Union and signed up 400 new members as well as organising unofficial strikes.

He refused to wear a dinner jacket when he was president of the Cambridge Union. He said he was not going to be bullied into an expense he could not afford.

After leaving university he began a career in broadcasting and became BBC senior TV producer, as well as being on the BBC's General Advisory Council.

He unsuccessfully fought Finchley for Labour in 1951 but was later selected for the safe seat of Stoke South which he held from 1966 until 1992 when he became a life peer and went to the Lords.

Lord Ashley quickly became a parliamentary private secretary and seemed destined for a brilliant political career when deafness struck through an infection. He said he felt his life was "in pieces" and thought he had become "politically, a dead man".

But he was persuaded to stay. He was soon active in helping disabled people, introducing a Bill to "reverse the scandalous injustice of battered women and their children being forced to leave home while vicious men retain comfort and security".

Ashley also took up the causes of women who had been raped, thalidomide victims, people who were bullied in the armed forces and victims of vaccination, among many others.

Meanwhile, with his devoted and now-late wife Pauline, he learned to lip read and answer the telephone. He had a portable monitor in the House of Commons with which he was able to read a quickfire transcription of what was being said in the Commons chamber.

Even so, the way he coped with the hurly-burly of parliamentary life astonished even his closest friends. Much later he benefited from a new cochlear implant device and expressed utter joy at hearing the voice of his grandchild.

He said the sounds were like "listening to a croaking Dalek with laryngitis but compared with total deafness, it is a miracle".

Ashley's work for disabled people brought him the chairmanship of the all-party Lords and Commons Disablement Group and in 1975 he was appointed a Companion of Honour. He also served on Labour's ruling national executive committee.

Neil Kinnock, then leader of the Labour party, paid the warmest possible tribute when Ashley announced in 1989 he would not be fighting the next election.

Kinnock said: "He has never stopped being a brilliant parliamentarian, an unsurpassed constituency MP and a man of the firmest conviction and endless kindness. No one in a generation has been or is a bolder or more tenacious campaigner for justice."

But Lord Ashley's campaigning zeal did not end with his departure from the Commons. Even well past the age of 70, he continued his work in the House of Lords and remained as fearless as ever in criticising the Labour government, particularly over disability issues, whenever he felt ministers were not doing the right thing.

In December 2003 Lord Ashley was given a lifetime achievement award in the ePolitix website charity champions awards.

He is survived by three daughters (as of December 2003). One of his daughters, Jackie Ashley, is married to Andrew Marr, the BBC political editor, and is also a political commentator in her own right. Lord Ashley's wife, Pauline, died in 2003.