

Ernest Walker

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WEATHER

Edinburgh 6.7°C



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Health campaigner;

Born: April 1, 1945; Died: November 6, 2011.

ERNEST Walker, who has died aged 66, was a single-issue politician who inadvertently helped secure the first SNP administration at the Scottish Parliament.

Mr Walker, known as Ernie, a former health service chief in the south of England, was the pivotal figure in a campaign against the downgrading of St John's Hospital in Livingston, West Lothian.

His efforts eventually led to the establishment of the Action to Save St John's Hospital Party which went on to field candidates in both the Holyrood and local authority elections of 2007.

Six of Mr Walker's colleagues stood in the council elections and three were elected in the Labour stronghold of West Lothian.

For his part, Mr Walker stood as a candidate for the Scottish Parliament. Ever the pragmatist, he had no expectation of winning. The most he had hoped for was to steal a few votes away from the sitting Labour MSP. However, thanks to his hard work and characteristic gritty determination, he polled an impressive 2814 votes, knocking both the Tories and the LibDems into fourth and fifth place respectively.

More significant than that, was the fact that Labour's vote was slashed. This allowed the SNP to capture the seat with a majority of 870. In turn, this gave the Nats a one-seat majority at Holyrood. They went on to form a minority administration, the first SNP Government in the nation's history.

He was born in Ayr in 1945 and educated at Ayr Academy. After qualifying as a chartered management accountant, he joined the NHS in Glasgow as a 22-year-old graduate management trainee.

He completed his postgraduate training at Glasgow University and then worked locally in the health service before being appointed to a managerial post at Addenbrookes Teaching Hospital in Cambridge.

He later progressed to senior management posts in Bath and Bristol Health Authority before being appointed the youngest ever district administrator in Devon in 1981. He became district general manager four years later.

In 1991 Mr Walker and his family moved to London when he was appointed chief executive for the Mayday University Hospital, Croydon.

He left the NHS in 1997 and worked in the private sector as a management consultant before retiring in 2002 and moving back to Scotland. The family settled in the village of Dechmont, near Broxburn, West Lothian.

In 2005 Mr Walker became involved in the campaign to retain and improve services at his local hospital, St John's in Livingston. He and his supporters were concerned that, with scant regard for the needs and wishes of the community, the Labour administration at Holyrood was allowing the local health board to steadily downgrade the hospital after emergency surgery and trauma orthopaedic services were transferred to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary.

The former health service executive became chairman of the West Lothian NHS Campaign Group. Following a meeting of the protest group during which Mr Walker was lambasted by Labour Party members, he resigned and set up a breakaway group, the Stop The Downgrade campaign.

Joined by about 20 like-minded colleagues, they then set about forming their own single-issue political party to fight the 2007 elections. Four years later, the group continues to campaign and maintains a strong presence on West Lothian Council.

In April 2009, in a newsletter to campaign members, Mr Walker revealed that he was suffering from terminal cancer and he was receiving chemotherapy at Edinburgh's Western General.

He is survived by his wife Joyce, children Tom and Anna, and granddaughter Freya.