

Eulogy for Robert J. Whitelaw

Robert J. Whitelaw, Officer to the Treasury from 1943 to 1986, died in January of this year, aged 78. Following is the eulogy given by Ted Evans, Secretary to the Treasury, at the funeral service to celebrate the life of Robert J. Whitelaw.

The Service was held at St Johns, Reid on 27 January 2000.

When Bob Whitelaw joined the Treasury in February 1943, the Department agreed to pay his train fare from Melbourne to Canberra on the condition that he remain in the service of the Treasury for at least three months. Bob stayed for 43 years.

His service to the Treasury and the Australian people was extraordinary not just in its length but in the fact that it was devoted entirely to the issues of Australia's interest in international economic and financial matters. In his first years in the Department he was advising on the creation of the Bretton Woods institutions, the IMF and World Bank; 20 years later he was Australia's senior representative on the Committee of Twenty which reworked the Articles of Association of the IMF; and a decade later still he was a member of the Executive Board of that institution. This continuity of interest stamped him as one of the world's leading authorities on international financial matters.

His potential was recognised early and, in 1948, within five years of joining Treasury, he was awarded one of only two Public Service postgraduate scholarships to study abroad. Treasury again agreed to pay his fare (this time by boat to London) but, having done so, decided that he could not be spared from the work he was currently doing and postponed his scholarship for a year. He was eventually sent to London in 1949 but, before starting his studies, was required to act as the Treasury's senior representative in London for a period of six months: an enormous responsibility for a 28 year-old but an opportunity that he relished and used to build relationships that he maintained and developed over the next four decades.

He returned to Treasury in 1951 having added a doctorate from the University of London to the dual honours in economics and commerce that he had brought to the Department from the University of Melbourne.

Working still on international financial issues, he was rapidly promoted through the 1950s, attaining the position of Assistant Secretary in 1958.

He returned to London as Financial Counsellor in 1961, staying for a period of five years. Back to Treasury in 1966, he was appointed Executive Director of the Asian Development Bank in 1969 only to be recalled within the space of a year to become the first head of the newly created Overseas Economic Relations Division. In the early 1970s, he was instrumental in Australia gaining entry to the OECD; but at the same time he was the first in Treasury, to my knowledge, to recognise the importance of Asia and to lead Treasury thinking in that direction. He became Australia's Executive Director at the IMF in 1975, staying for a period of over five years, during which time he built the Asia Pacific Constituency to a group of ten countries.

Bob retired from the Treasury and the Australian Public Service in November 1986, on the eve of his sixty-fifth birthday. It was my impression then that, had the then Public Service Act not required his retirement, he would have 'died with his Treasury boots on'. He was still passionately interested in international matters and had amassed an enormous number of friends around the world.

Allow me to say a little more about R.J. Whitelaw, the man.

His younger years were tough; but a remarkable mother and Bob's hard work, shining intellect, great character and a loving family produced a life of high achievement and admiration. One could not overestimate Margaret's supporting, and at times guiding, role in all of that. Bob was friendly, interesting, witty and wise. Although essentially quiet by nature, when Bob spoke people listened. He was instinctively an objective and fair thinker; there was no place in his mind for dogma, economic or otherwise.

The Overseas Economic Relations Division of the Treasury which Bob established meant a lot to him. Through it, he influenced a younger generation of Treasury people, nurturing their interest in international economic issues. He was in a sense a magnet for them. He knew the ropes. They knew that if a proposed line of advice was OK with Bob, it was solid.

Economics was a big part of Bob's life, but there was much more to him than that. He was great with the English language, and a fine speechwriter. He regarded himself as 'an old fashioned, rounded public servant'; the eleven Prime Ministers whom he served, and greater number of Treasurers, would have agreed; indeed I've heard one use almost identical words. He loved the fine things of life — Oriental carpets, art, music, literature. He was an accomplished sportsman — cricket, Australian Rules, hockey, squash, golf. He liked to be with people.

Bob Whitelaw and mischief were not synonymous, but there was a certain association. Several Treasury Secretaries, and even Margaret, had to keep a close eye on him at times. Yet such was the pleasantness of his character that he was rarely in anyone's bad books for long and his endless wit and humour were probably his salvation on many occasions.

Those of us privileged to attend this service are a few among very many in this country, and in other countries, whose lives were touched for the better by having known Bob Whitelaw.

It is relatively common for people to say at a funeral that they will be the poorer for the passing of the deceased. In Bob's case, we can say that in spades.