

A Eulogy for Colin Gillion

Colin Gillion – fine economist, clever statistician, splendid mathematician, excellent econometrician, skilled teacher, social policy expert, outstanding economic researcher, valued mentor, able manager, leading international public servant, great team leader and team player, passionate lover of music, world traveler, keen sailor, gifted conversationalist, an intellectually very bright child of highly intelligent parents, devoted family man, husband, father, brother, the warmest and most interesting of friends one could have

Colin was born on 13 July 1938, attended Wanganui Collegiate and Mt Albert Grammar Schools, and became a New Zealand University National Entrance Scholar in 1957. From the University of Auckland and Victoria University of Wellington, he graduated Bachelor and Master of Arts with first class honours and a PhD in pure and applied mathematics, statistics, and economics. His PhD was a path breaking work on Structural Change in the New Zealand Economy.

He then worked variously with the New Zealand Department of Statistics, the NZ Institute of Economic Research, the National Institute of Economic Research in the United Kingdom, Victoria University of Wellington, Cambridge University in the UK, with me at the Reserve Bank of NZ, the OECD in Paris and finally the International Labour Organization, the ILO, in Geneva.

This fascinating array of positions, many of them at a senior level, reflected the fact that Colin was an excellent teacher but that his first and abiding love was economic and social research. At this he was not only outstanding in terms of the original work he produced but also in terms of the way in which he nurtured and encouraged so many others who had the good fortune to work alongside him. He was insistent on any research with which he was associated having meaningful outcomes and most desirably pointing to lessons of moment for economic and social policy.

A senior member (Alejandro Bonilla-Garcia) of the ILO Social Security Department wrote to Patricia a few days ago to say how sad they were to hear of Colin's passing, and observed "As our former Director, Colin was respected and admired for his fine qualities and he will be fondly remembered and appreciated for all he did for the world of social security".

And at an individual level, another colleague (Jack Martin) wrote "Colin has been such an important person in my life and a real authority on social protection. He will be greatly mourned by his many colleagues and friends in the ILO and elsewhere. For me, he was the source of much wisdom, someone to whom one could turn for good sound advice on the most important matters of policy, as well as on questions of the utmost frivolity. He was great company, a man with a human touch and endless resources of good humour".

Other ILO friends (Wouter van Ginneken, Michael Cichon, Christopher Baron) wrote of how Colin found them roles which they loved, of Colin as a “real gentleman”, a formidably “hard worker”, but always with an accompanying joviality, “a person who cared about his people and the issues on which they worked”, of how he was “extraordinarily on top of the issues” in his Department, of how he was “straightforward and helpful” to others, “affable and cheerful”, an “outstanding and dynamic” Director within the ILO, of how he was “entirely devoted” to his programmes of work and to his staff, and as “a good and faithful friend”, one who was “warm and engaging; good hearted and supportive”.

Colin was admired for what was described as his “unique capacity to analyse politically complex situations”, an ability his successor observed as being “unrivalled within the ILO even today”. He travelled to almost every corner of the globe and advised numerous governments, large and small, from China to Cyprus. His monumental text on social security pensions is one of the world’s leading works in the field, so much so that a Chinese version was prepared and published.

During his long and varied career Colin wrote numerous academic and official papers, many of the more important of which were published and presented as speeches.

The diversity of his research interests was astounding.

Over the years, he worked on matters which ranged from population projections to the design of sample surveys; from index number compilations to forecast of the demand for power; from the construction of life cycle tables to production functions for different industries; from surveys of business opinion to econometric forecasting; from pricing behavior in manufacturing to the duration and location of unemployment; from input/output techniques to the demand for newsprint; from computer programs to cost/benefit studies of airports; from the demand for automobiles to the effects of tariff changes; from housing policy to the structure of the New Zealand economy; and from electoral voting patterns to reducing earthquake risk. And these are just illustrations.

But Colin was ultimately to do his greatest work and make his most substantial original contributions in the fields of social policy and the design of superannuation at the ILO where he became an international leader. He had been highly interested in these fields at the OECD and the ILO became a natural and easy transition for him. In many ways, he found his true place at the International Labour Organization and, as many colleagues have testified, made a huge contribution there.

Colin was a man of many parts. He was wonderfully multi talented which, supplemented by a marvelous vocabulary and a highly retentive memory, made for a splendid conversationalist. He loved fine music but as in other matters had firm tastes. Colin was an inveterate yachtsman and enjoyed sailing, not least around Wellington harbour and later the Mediterranean. His love of food and wine and cheese was legendary.

There were no better dinner party companions than Patricia and Colin. He had read widely and was knowledgeable in many areas, quietly and modestly always being willing to share his great base of ideas and knowledge.

The memories flash through one's mind of the lovely holidays we had together in the United Kingdom, France and Italy, with Patricia as our diligently well informed and hugely well read tour leader.

Colin was a marvelous travelling companion and my wife Gillian and I together with our daughter Kristen were the great beneficiaries of that. When we were young, our families, seven of us, would crowd - or is it crush ? - into a tiny Ford Escort station wagon and tour Italy together. Paul and Chris were assigned uncomplainingly to the boot along with the baggage. They happily emerged in good shape from that experience, obviously having inherited some of their Father's resilience and good humour.

And what good humour Colin was blessed with and in turn blessed all his friends with. Despite all odds, he showed great courage, resilience, fortitude and determination, aided by his endless good humour, to live life as fully as he was able to after his strokes. Patricia cared for him in the most enlightened and loving way. She said to me recently that she never once heard Colin complain about the challenges he faced after his strokes. Thanks in turn to Patricia's strength of character and wonderful determination, Colin was always able to attend his much loved NZSO concerts right till the end.

Manuel was a superb help to Patricia and I know she would like me to acknowledge that. Manuel shared his own strength with Colin and enabled him to continue to explore the world around him. Colin greatly valued and respected Manuel. The staff at the Malvina Major Village were generous and always helpful to Colin and Patricia and I would like to convey the family's appreciation of that. They welcome you here today as you come to show your respect for Colin and your support for Patricia and the family.

Colin was a real family person. He greatly loved Patricia and his two sons, Paul and Chris, and their partners and families. Martin and Paul have spoken of that.

However, I must tell Paul and Chris that Colin was hugely proud of them, to an extent they may not have fully realized. Such is the way of the world between fathers and sons. Colin followed Paul and Chris's activities closely and was always keen to talk about them, their lives, and the people in their lives. Patricia and Colin would have been married for 50 years come August. It was a relationship of much love and affection, qualities which they generously shared with all their many friends. As a couple they had a true gift for friendship.

I recall when I first met Colin, then going home to Gillian and saying we must really invite these people to dinner. Before we could do that, they invited us to their home. I cannot tell you how much their friendship has meant to us and I know many others share that sentiment.

I will always remember Colin with much affection as a wonderful friend, a fine economist and work colleague, and a real character.

Lest I paint a picture of some saint however, let me hasten to say that I did not always appreciate some of Colin's more adventurous characteristics. Sailing in his home made yacht and almost ramming it into the wharf in our enthusiasm to demonstrate its seaworthy nature was scary, to say nothing of embarrassing. At least we caused great mirth to all the onlookers who teased us incessantly. Colin's driving skills and love of hurtling down the European expressways at high speed tested us at times. Needing to stop at the nougat factory, or wherever, to facilitate a change of driver to the more expert Patricia induced a not inconsiderable sense of relief.

But of course Colin had so many outstanding qualities: a splendid intellect and the wonderful vocabulary I spoke of earlier, which made him such a hugely enjoyable companion and friend, a warmth and thoughtfulness which so many of us benefitted from, an enjoyment of life which was infectious and enlivening for others, a determination to contribute to the betterment of others, a positive and courageous attitude to life despite adversity, a great good humour through thick and thin, a gift for public speaking and a marvelous intellectual curiosity (he was always one of the lead contributors at the Economist Association's meetings, albeit always with an appealing modesty), a man who mixed and socialized happily and easily with all walks of life, and a generosity of spirit which contributed to the lives of all around him.

We will miss Colin greatly. Patricia and the family will be bereft without him. Patricia cared for him beautifully and ensured he was always well looked after as things got more difficult. Now he has found peace.

We will always remember him with great warmth and affection. He was a distinguished international citizen and civil servant in the very best sense of those terms; a special person to many of us; and we are so much the better for his life and his friendship.

Thank you Colin. Farewell dear friend.

You will live on forever in the hearts and minds of those who loved you.

Roderick Deane

10 April 2013