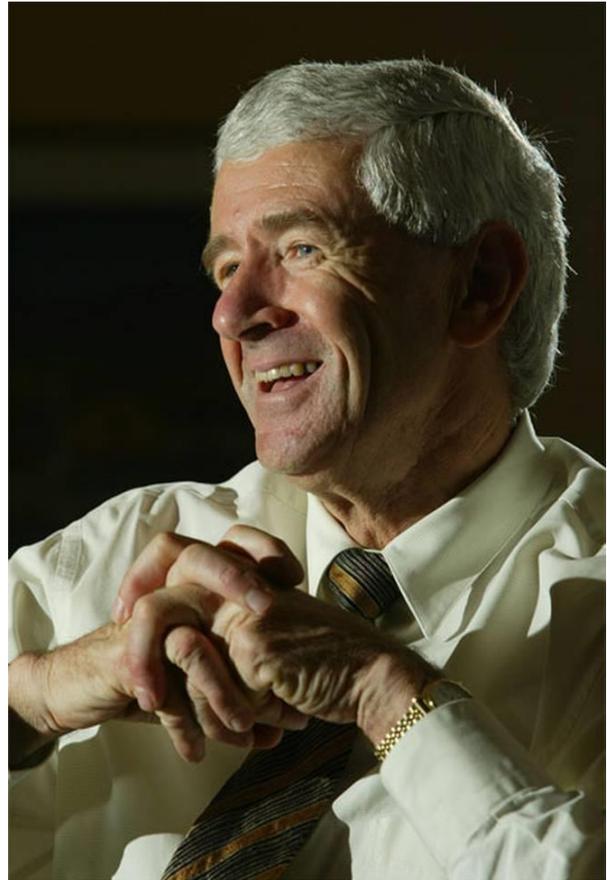


Roger Lawrence Kerr CNZM

(1945-2011) made a huge contribution to the advancement of economic policy in New Zealand, first as an officer in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Department, then as an Assistant Secretary in the NZ Treasury, and later as the Executive Director of the NZ Business Roundtable (NZBR), now the New Zealand Initiative. I was Deputy Chairman of the NZBR for many years.



As a young person, Roger was an outstanding student and achieved incredibly high grades across many disciplines, including French, English, Mathematics, Economics, Accountancy and in other spheres. He was the top student in New Zealand in the School Certificate examinations and then also in the National Scholarship examinations in his final year at high school. He later graduated initially with first class honours in French Literature and went on to major with the highest grades in a variety of subjects, including what was to become his first love, economics.

I had the privilege of teaching him economics at Victoria University of Wellington and over many years of teaching he was the best student I ever experienced.

He worked in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister's Department as a young person before moving to the Treasury where he went on to become Assistant Secretary to the Treasury, a senior post in those days, and of most importance led one of the teams which was responsible for laying the foundations for a huge upgrade in the intellectual and economic base of the Treasury. He played a major role in advancing the changes which resulted in the economic liberalizations of the 1980's and 1990's, and the subsequent restoration of much improved productivity growth. Indeed the period 1988 to 2000 saw the best performance of the NZ economy for very many decades in terms of productivity growth.

By way of elaborating on my association with Roger, I should note that I also knew him well in my various roles as Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of NZ during the 1980's, as Chairman of the State Services Commission when the State Owned Enterprises were created and much reform of the public sector took place, as CEO of what was then the largest SOE, the Electricity Corporation of NZ, on which company's board Roger sat as a non-executive Director, as CEO and then Chairman of Telecom NZ, and as Chairman of Fletchers, ANZ NZ Bank and as a Director of both ANZ Bank in Melbourne and Woolworths Limited in Sydney.

I taught Economics part time for many years at Victoria University of Wellington, becoming Professor of Economics and Management in 2000. I had the pleasure of working closely with Roger in a number of these roles.

Roger was Executive Director of the NZ Business Roundtable for a remarkable 25 years. He was a leading player in the economic policy debates during that time, playing a major role in developing and researching and promoting better policies for a better New Zealand across a remarkably wide spectrum of policy areas. While he was a splendid advocate for better policies, one to whom many governments turned for advice, sometimes privately rather than publicly, his other hugely important role was to persuade the business community that it should stand up for better policies for all New Zealanders and not simply concentrate on sectional business interests.

The array of publications and speeches and conferences organised by the NZBR under Roger's auspices was second to none in New Zealand in terms of both quality and quantity. This resulted in considerable public international recognition for Roger and the research he conducted to say nothing of the amazing array of policy analytical and empirical work he promoted by engaging the resources of internationally recognised economists to research and write on NZ economic policy issues.

As well as receiving the 2001 NZIER Qantas Economics Award, Roger was awarded the Tasman Medal by the Melbourne-based Tasman Institute in 1994 in recognition of his contribution to public policy. In 2005 he was awarded the Charles Copeman Medal by the HR Nicholls Society for distinguished service in the cause of New Zealand and Australian workplace relations. He was a Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Management (FNZIM) and a member of the Institute of Directors.

He was a Director of the Electricity Corporation of New Zealand, a member of the Council of Victoria University of Wellington, and a member of the Group Board of Colonial Limited in Melbourne from 1996 to 2000.

The Chairman of the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research, Michael Walls, on presenting the NZIER Qantas Economics Award to Roger Kerr in 2001 observed correctly that:

“No single individual has done more over the last 15 years to persuade important parts of the business sector to support economic policies which, though often contrary to the interests of individual firms, were in the interests of the country as a whole.”

There would be no economist in NZ with a superior record of publications in the economic policy arena. His advocacy of better policies was tireless and exhaustive. The networks of people he interacted with was extensive.

Roger was on some occasions a controversial figure for his strength of advocacy of sound and progressive economic policies for New Zealand despite the predilections of some journalists and politicians to feel that open and vigorous debate on these matters was not always welcome. But he always remained staunch, calm and persuasive, intellectually rigorous and an advocate for empirical and research based solutions to economic and social problems.

He was willing to engage in debate with anyone in any forum in the interest of pursuing the right solutions. He was creative and courageous and indomitable. He was also endlessly generous in helping others and in encouraging debate to further our state of knowledge about the big issues. People who took the time to get to know Roger well typically found him to be a strong colleague and a wonderful friend.

The media image does not always capture the personality and charm. He was a strong character who expected high standards from himself and others and who much preferred to debate the topic rather than the person.

Roger Kerr was a truly outstanding economist and an outstanding New Zealander. No one contributed more to the advancement of good economic policies in New Zealand and for New Zealand. He had a strong and well deserved international profile and recognition. In the world of economics and business he was one of New Zealand's leading figures and a real and talented leader. His contribution to economic research and better policies in New Zealand was huge.

Tribute prepared by Sir Roderick Deane in 2011