

## **Reflections on a Life Well Lived**

### **Tribute to Sir Ron Trotter**

**Old St Paul's, Wellington**

**17 August 2010**

Margaret and the family have asked me to reflect on Sir Ron's role in business and public affairs and I'm honoured to do so. I loved Ron like a father. So it was with a heavy heart that I sat down to write these notes on Friday. While we all know that Ron had lived the best and fullest of lives, and was ready to take his leave, that doesn't lessen the grief that comes with losing a great and dear friend, colleague, mentor and leader.

Let me start at the beginning. Ron's parents had great foresight in naming him. The name Ronald means Mighty Power. It is linked to Isaiah chapter 40 verse 31: "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

Another starting point may seem a strange analogy. A few years ago I read Paul Johnson's biography of George Washington, the first president of the United States and one of the greatest. As I turned the pages of the book I was struck, time and time again, by the parallels with Ron.

Washington was a big man, in stature and in every other way. Like Ron, he was a country boy – he grew up on the family farm. He became a patriotic leader and the military commander of the American revolution. A born conciliator, Washington presided over the Philadelphia Convention of the founding fathers of the US Constitution and reconciled the warring factions. Ron also had a great ability to bring people together: he was at his best when 'presiding'.

Washington was described by another biographer as endowed with "an unvarying sense of moral right" and a man of great character. He not only rejected offers to make him king but willingly relinquished rather than retained power. He wrote with relief, near the end of his term as president,

“A few months more will put an end to my political existence, and place me in the shades of Mount Vernon, under my vine and fig tree.”

I think of Ron as one of the founders of the new New Zealand. The first recipient of a Visionary Leader Award in 1997, he was described as “a man of vision, who played a leading role in the ... revitalisation of business and economics in this country.”

Most of you will know the story of Ron’s extraordinary life. The farm boy from Hawera; growing up in the depression years, when the family would put up passing swagmen in their house or woodshed; riding his pony to Hawera Main School; learning about agricultural services from his father Clem; the start of a lifelong love of rural New Zealand.

What some of you may not know is that Ron was once a front row soprano in the Hawera Midgets choir. Can you imagine that?

But for better or worse, Ron did not pursue a career in opera. He went on to Wanganui Collegiate where his natural flair for business became evident. Along with a school mate, the 15-year-old Ron decided to go into the icecream trade, to liven up the rather boring weekends for the other boarders. They pooled their capital of £7; went into town and arranged for the Tip Top distributor to deliver a drum of icecream and cones to the school; sold the lot to the eager boarders without managing a taste themselves; and made a profit of £5, which they split. Flushed with this success, they planned to expand into boiled sweets and liquorice all-sorts. Regrettably the headmaster heard about the venture and gated them for two weeks. Not for the last time, Ron learned about this country’s habit of restricting commerce and suppressing entrepreneurship.

Then it was Victoria University College, Lincoln College, the first job at Hamilton and Te Puke with Farmers Auctioneering – which gave rise to a legendary story about Ron, and a running of the pigs, through Te Puke. Next it was the stock and station agent in Hawkes Bay, the discovery of his talents by Sir Clifford Plimmer, and, most importantly, marriage to Margaret in 1955.

The move to Wellington was in 1959. Ron took over Wright Stephenson from Sir Clifford as managing director when he was just over 40, merged the company with National Mortgage and Agency, and built Challenge Corporation.

The next giant step was the merger of Challenge, Tasman (which Robert Muldoon had asked him to chair) and Fletchers in 1980 to form Fletcher Challenge. Ron had been involved with firms in protected industries, like Morrisons, but had come to understand the need for New Zealand business to be internationally competitive and have scale to foot it in the outside world.

Through the '80s Ron and Hugh Fletcher built Fletcher Challenge to become the country's largest and very successful company. Ron retired as chief executive in 1987 and continued as chairman through the more difficult times for the company in the 1990s until he stepped down in 1995.

By that time, Ron's roles in business and public life read like an unrolling scroll. Among other things he had been president of the New Zealand Woolbrokers' Association, chairman of the Overseas Investment Commission, on the Reserve Bank board, chairman of the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research, a chairman or director of New Zealand Insurance, Air New Zealand, Telecom, Wrightson, the group board of the ANZ Bank in Melbourne, Ciba-Geigy, and Toyota NZ.

Roderick Deane has described Ron the businessman as highly intelligent, rigorous, tough, splendid at deals, and always totally ethical. He was very competitive, overheard on one occasion saying, "If you can't beat the Aussies, it's not worth getting out of bed in the morning." He was a 1999 laureate of the New Zealand Business Hall of Fame. Ron was unquestionably the leading New Zealand business figure of his time.

Ron also played a huge role in public affairs. Already in the 1960s he was involved in them with the economic development conferences of the Holyoake years. He was stirring things up from an early stage. At an agricultural conference in Hamilton, Brian Talboys gave what Ron regarded as a woolly speech about manufacturing development. Ron got up and

reminded him that the New Zealand economy was based on the land: “Why aren’t we having an agricultural development conference?” he asked. The 500 farmers present cheered, and Talboys said, “OK then, we’ll have one”.

As time went on, Ron became the business leader most sought after by governments and parties of all political persuasions for help and advice.

With the change of government in 1984, Ron chaired the steering committee for David Lange’s Economic Summit of that year which marked the turning point from the country’s inward-looking past to one engaged with the world. He was knighted in 1985. He was a leader or member of several New Zealand trade missions. He was an adviser to the Labour government on SOEs and chair of the board overseeing the National government’s public hospital reforms in the early 1990s.

My own close association with Ron began in 1986 when he became the founding chairman of the Business Roundtable in its present form and appointed me to run it.

Ron was the natural leader of New Zealand’s leading CEOs. Those were the days when Roger Douglas was operating on the principle that, if you had to cut off the dog’s tail, it was better to do it in one cut, not an inch at a time. It was a very difficult and painful period of adjustment for many businesses and people, but the programme was remarkable despite its flaws, and it saved New Zealand.

We now take most of the changes for granted, but they seemed radical and were hugely controversial then. Ron staunchly supported the good ones, highlighted the weaknesses, and tirelessly pushed for improvements like the labour market and producer board reforms of the 1990s. He (and indeed Margaret) had to tolerate much more than their fair share of flak, but without Ron and his influence in the business community, the job of reforming governments would have been much harder.

As chairman of the Business Roundtable, Ron gave countless speeches and media interviews. Through 1989 he had a two-minute slot each week

on Radio Pacific at 6.45 am, entitled *A Piece of His Mind* – which is what he gave.

In 2007, knowing that Ron's life was drawing to a close, we presented him with a collected volume of his speeches called *The Trotter Times* at a retreat on Alan Gibbs' farm. He accepted it in his customary modest way. The last lines from the last speech in that volume were typical of his message: "My vision of the future for New Zealand is not as a rest home for the retired, and a trap for the unsuccessful, with a sideline business as a picturesque, low-cost theme park for the wealthy from overseas. We can do so much better than that".

Ron continued to help us to the end, giving a talk in 2006 to a public policy symposium on Waiheke Island which he had written out in longhand, and timed precisely to 10 minutes on his kitchen clock. He did on that occasion leave his briefcase on the Auckland Wharf, and it had to be retrieved a few days later from the bomb disposal squad.

In 1995 we inaugurated the annual Sir Ronald Trotter Lecture in Ron's honour. The first lecture was given by Richard Epstein, arguably the most brilliant legal scholar of our times. Richard wrote to me last week recalling Ron's friends speaking of him with "a kind of respect that bordered on reverence." "That kind of respect", Richard wrote, "does not come solely from great business achievements or from the accumulation of great wealth. It comes from a life dedicated to an excellence of character and judgment and of good deeds that are universally known and respected."

Another who gave the lecture and greatly impressed Ron was the late Yegor Gaidar, at one time Russia's acting prime minister under Boris Yeltsin, and a leading architect of that country's difficult transition to democracy and a market economy.

The final Trotter lecture Ron attended was given in 2007 by Margaret Thatcher's chancellor of the exchequer Nigel Lawson. Lord Lawson reflected in a message to me last week on how Ron had "given a lead to people in business to transcend their day-to-day preoccupations and look at the bigger picture to the benefit of New Zealand as a whole."

Sadly, Ron could not make it to the last Trotter Lecture, given by fellow Taranaki boy and great admirer, Stephen Jennings, about his insights from his remarkable business career in Russia and other emerging economies. On the one day he had in Wellington to deliver the lecture, Stephen made a point of driving to Te Horo to visit Ron, and he has come back from Moscow to be here today. Many other old friends and colleagues, including Sir Roger Douglas, Sir Douglas Myers, Roderick and Gillian Deane, Alan Gibbs, Bob Field, Bryce Wilkinson and especially Paul Baines, made special efforts to visit Ron in the last few months. I know that meant a lot to him.

Ron's other roles are too numerous to list, but one that deserves special mention is the contribution he and Margaret made to the arts. Together they built up the outstanding Challenge and then Fletcher Challenge art collections, and Ron was chair of Te Papa for six years. Margaret was a tower of strength and comfort to Ron throughout his life, and especially over the last few months.

Since his death last week, the tributes that came my way from his business peers and others have been overwhelming. They were from all over the world. The family must have received hundreds.

Ron's successor as Business Roundtable chair, Douglas Myers, wrote, "It is a great loss of one of New Zealand's true sons, for it is very hard even to think of New Zealand without him." Another successor, Sir Ralph Norris, spoke of a great "man of vision". Rob McLeod said, "I struggle to identify anyone I admired more in terms of his contributions to, and concern for, New Zealand and New Zealanders." Nick Calavrias was right to observe that "few in business today will appreciate what Sir Ron did in the mid-'80s when the easiest way out for him and big business would have been to retain the status quo." Ruth Richardson said New Zealand owes Ron "a huge debt" (and I would add we need to see his like again among business leaders if the country is to succeed and prosper). Prime minister John Key, who is with us today, said "His vision, determination and leadership were legendary."

For my part, I will remember most of all Ron the man: the captain of industry with enormous charm, who walked with kings but never lost the common touch; the father-figure, who was wonderful with children; the big, flowing handwriting; the person who marched against the Springbok tour, and had great empathy with Maori; the humble, self-deprecating, “old bull in the back paddock” as he used to say; the man who loved to ride his horse (and was known to fall off it); the old-school values of thrift, loyalty, integrity, courage and hard work (“I guess I could dig ditches if I don’t get a pension”, I remember him saying, and he once compared himself to a draught horse, a “diligent hard worker rather than a business genius”). Sir Roderick Weir said Ron rose to the top in business because of his wonderful nature: “Everyone liked him”, Rod said. I agree: I have never known anyone who was so universally loved and admired. Nothing made Ron happier than being with his family and his enormous circle of friends, enjoying a good yarn and a chuckle. This was never truer than in the last couple of years, when many of us visited him at Te Horo – for many years his Mount Vernon – or at Mary Potter.

And so we say farewell to one of the truly great New Zealanders. I recall the beautiful words that Ronald Reagan, whom Ron met and greatly admired, used about the astronauts who perished in the Challenger disaster: They “slipped the surly bonds of earth”, Reagan said, to “touch the face of God.”

They apply to Ron today. Ron, your immense work on earth is done. Your life was well lived. May flights of angels guide you to your rest.