

Roger Kerr 1945-2011
An Appreciation

By

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Earlier this morning I received a simple email from Catherine Isaac that “Roger passed away peacefully at home last night surrounded by his family.” That brief email came as no surprise, because her previous communications had indicated that all treatment options had been exhausted. But for me that short message marks the sad end of an era in my personal life.

Roger was one of a kind. I first met him in 1990, when he prevailed on me to come to New Zealand to speak, among other things, against the new pay equity legislation that had just become law in New Zealand. Roger was never a man for half measures so that he managed to line up about eight or ten other speaking engagements during that short stay. It was the first of four such nonstop visits to New Zealand, each of which Roger orchestrated with his customary enthusiasm and efficiency. After each of the trips, he would prepare a transcript of my remarks, be sure that they were edited, and then passed them back to me for elaboration and expansion, after which they were published by the New Zealand Business Roundtable, which he had led since 1986.

Working that closely with Roger over so many years, and in so many different settings, gave a bird’s eye view of the man. Often a close working knowledge of another human being leads to a certain cynicism well captured by the somewhat faded aphorism that no man is a hero unto this valet.

That was not the case with Roger. The more you knew him, the more you came to respect and love him as a person. He had a combination of attributes that are hard to match. On those trips to New Zealand, I was always joined by my wife Eileen, and sometimes by my children as well. We not only worked together, but we vacationed together for extended periods of time. We also managed to get together in other locations, including for the last time at the Mont Pelerin meeting in Stockholm, in August 2009.

Being with Roger was a revelation. All too often it is said of people who are in favor of markets, they only do so because it gives an outlet for their own greed and other base emotions. Nothing could be further from the truth with Roger. The most extraordinary feature about him was the exemplary way in which he consciously chose to lead his life.

For Roger, the freedom under law to act in your own self-interest was an invitation to make sure that you led your life in accordance with the highest principles of right conduct. Roger never used to speak about profit and personal gain. And he never spoke much about how it was that he should lead his own life. He always sensed that self-praise was a way to diminish your own character, so he relied on quiet deeds to communicate the values that he held most dear.

First on that list was his incredible sense of duty toward others with whom he worked. Doing business with Roger was always a pleasure, because you knew down to the marrow of your bones that Roger's word was indeed his bond. What he said he did, and if that did not satisfy his personal sense of duty, why he would do something else in addition. For Roger the correct ecological balance was to do all that he could to help others, and to be self-reliant in all that he did, so as never to tax the good will resources of others. One might say that throughout his life he enjoyed a favorable balance of trade with the rest of the world. He received much from those with whom he gave, but he always gave back more in return.

Second on that list was Roger's utter incorruptibility on all matters of first principle. Early in life, and surely in his days at Treasury under Sir Roger Douglas, Roger internalized the importance of open markets and free trade. Watching New Zealand nearly implode under its grotesque policies made a lasting impression on Roger. Taxes and subsidies for competitive advantage fell into the class of original sins. He could never lift a finger to support such ignoble causes, even for his friends.

As head of the New Zealand Business Roundtable, Roger lived his principles on an everyday basis. He labored successfully through his 25 year tenure of office, to make sure that this organization would not seek to find short-term advantages for its members at the expense of the public at large. For Roger, these were matters of high principle, not issues of short-term expediency. To be with him in conversation was to know of the strength of his convictions and of the quiet eloquence and determination with which he defended them.

Third on the list was Roger's piercing intellect. Dwight Eisenhower once described an intellectual as someone who used more words to say less than he knew. That was never the case with Roger. Over the years, I have had the privilege to read the many addresses and short articles that Roger wrote on a variety in economic and social issues, large and small. In each of these gems, Roger was the master of a clear and orderly exposition of any topic. He possessed the power to persuade without any of the pretense and self-importance of lesser.

During his life, Roger suffered many short term reversals, for his positions were not always popular in intellectual and political circles. But his persistence and clarity have paid enormous dividends to New Zealand. His ceaseless efforts to pass the Employee Contracts Act of 1990 accomplished far more for the health and well-being of New Zealand labor markets than his detractors could acknowledge. The success was so great that even the passage of the misguided Employment Relations

Act of 2000 could not undo most of the gains from market liberalisation that the earlier statute had achieved.

Today New Zealand ranks near the top on most indices of economic freedom. Much of the credit for that improvement goes to Roger, whose dedication and wisdom has made the world a much richer place. We shall all miss him greatly, for the grandness of his character, for the strength of his moral fiber, for his clarity of his thought, and for the warmth of his friendship.