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## Reflections on the Life of Kenneth William Piddington (1933–2014)

Few public servants in the post-war era have made such a significant contribution in so many fields or shown more vision than Ken Piddington. Tragically, Ken was killed in a motor accident near Sanson on 28 February 2014, while en route to his eco-friendly property near Mount Ruapehu.

Born in London to Australian parents, Ken Piddington attended 12 schools in the United Kingdom and Australia before his father, Ralph, took up an appointment as the first professor of anthropology at Auckland University, a position he was to hold until 1974. In at least two areas Ken was to follow his father. The first was in a commitment to 'supporting Māori aspirations': Professor Piddington began the teaching of te reo Māori at Auckland University. (Ken was a fluent te reo speaker.) Secondly, Professor Piddington, like his son, demonstrated 'a keen sense of justice', early in his career earning censure from the authorities for giving publicity to abuses of Aborigines (Metge, 2000). Ken too was notable for his willingness to challenge those in authority.

After graduating in languages from Auckland University, Ken taught briefly, but then in 1959 joined the Department of External Affairs in Paris where he had been studying (and where he met his wife, Pam). After a short period in Wellington (including a spell of secondment to the Treasury) Ken took up his first overseas postings.

New Zealand's external economic policy in the early 1960s was dominated by the United Kingdom's relations with the European Union (then the European



Economic Community of six members, founded in 1957). The High Commission in London and the new New Zealand Mission opened in Brussels in 1961 were at the centre of the negotiations that were launched in 1961 by the Macmillan government, halted by de Gaulle in January 1963, and successfully resumed by Edward Heath in 1970. Ken Piddington, fluent in French, played his part in the intense efforts in Wellington and in European posts devoted to the successful protection of New Zealand's

vital export markets that resulted in the Luxembourg Protocol of 1971.

In the early 70s, after a spell in 1966–67 in Geneva during the GATT Kennedy round of trade negotiations, Ken moved away from New Zealand trade policy into new fields. In 1972 he became the deputy director of the South Pacific Bureau for Economic Cooperation, set up in Suva by the recently-formed Pacific Islands Forum to facilitate member cooperation on trade, tourism, transportation and economic development. Ken made a strong contribution to fostering the beginnings of a regional consciousness in the Pacific. He helped to establish the Forum Secretariat, the Forum Line and the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme. This was the period during which New Zealand began consciously to move from being the administering authority in a number of island territories to establishing its identity with other nations of the South Pacific. As Brian Talboys put it in July 1972, 'if we had a British past we certainly have a Pacific future' (quoted in Henderson, 1999).

Back in Wellington, Ken was seconded in April 1976 from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to a task force charged, under the leadership of Sir Frank Holmes, to 'study previous experience with planning in New Zealand and to recommend an institutional framework to meet present-day requirements for planning' (Task Force on Economic and Social Planning, 1976, p.3). Various sector councils had been established during the 60s, and in 1968 the Holyoake government mounted a National Development Conference and then set up a representative National Development Council. The Kirk government

abolished the council in 1973, but the notion of ‘planning’ had support among some politicians, the public service and academia. Essentially what was sought was a policy framework with supporting institutions that took the long view and ranged holistically across economic, social and cultural developments. Such a viewpoint characterised Ken Piddington’s approach throughout his life, whatever the policy area in which he was engaged.

The report of the task force, *New Zealand at the Turning Point*, was delivered in October 1976. By May 1977 the New Zealand Planning Council proposed by the task force had held its first meeting. Chaired by Frank Holmes, the council had a diverse membership and was advised by a secretariat led by Ken Piddington. Over the next two years it reviewed a wide range of issues and published a significant number of reports. The Planning Council series included publications on topics ranging across the economic future, taxation reform, the welfare state, employment policy, public expenditure and regional planning.

The publication closest to Ken’s heart was undoubtedly *He Matapuna: a source; some Maori perspectives* (New Zealand Planning Council, 1976), illustrated with Ans Westra photographs and containing essays by Māori who played a notable part in changing cultural attitudes from the 70s and dispelling ‘the assumption of Pakeha superiority’.<sup>1</sup> Each essay was prefaced with a brief commentary which bears the Piddington stamp. The message conveyed was, as Frank Holmes expressed it in the foreword, ‘We must stop using Pakeha values as the sole basis of our planning and policy-making.’

A few months later Ken, spurred by a *New Zealand Listener* editorial, published a response, and then as a planning paper a short essay, *Puzzled, Pakeha?*, in which he reflected on his own experience, including of Māori urban drift to Auckland, and challenged Pākehā to review their attitudes to the changing place of Māori in New Zealand society (Piddington, 1980a, 1980b). This is a piece of well-grounded advocacy that is as relevant today as when it was written over 30 years ago.

The legacy of his father was undoubtedly a significant factor in Ken’s life-long interest in and commitment to encouraging an enlightened approach to bicultural relations in New Zealand. The phrase ‘the principles of the Treaty’ which found its way into wide-ranging legislation is attributed to him. Māori leadership referred to him as a ‘lightning rod’ in transforming the perception of Māori culture in New Zealand society.

Another strong influence on Ken was his close friendship with writer Witi Ihimaera, begun when Ihimaera was serving with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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Environment, a position he was to serve in for six years. The substantial role that he was to play in issues about conservation and a sustainable New Zealand (and global) environment had begun. This was the era of Robert Muldoon’s ‘Think Big’ national investment: challenges to environmental values were not surprising. Piddington was not afraid to take up these challenges. Most often cited is his successful advocacy in confrontation with the prime minister over the project to pipe into the sea the polluted waste from the Taranaki synthetic fuel plant. The effect on Māori fishing grounds was the deciding consideration.

Piddington brought to his managerial role at the Commission for the Environment the qualities that had enabled him successfully to lead the team in the Planning Council secretariat,

notably his calm, and a willingness to allow staff a measure of self-expression and to encourage the enrichment of their skills. Ken’s analytical capacity was matched by an ability to express himself with skill orally or in writing.

His next role was to test these qualities severely. On 1 April 1987 New Zealand’s environmental administration was radically changed in accordance with the principles that were to shape the reform of the governmental system in the late 1980s. Non-commercial functions were to be separated from commercial; policy advice was to be separated from operational responsibilities. The Commission for the Environment (along with the Department of Lands and Survey and the New Zealand Forest Service) was abolished. Two policy ministries were established, the Ministry for the Environment and the Ministry of Forestry, and two departments with mixed responsibilities were formed: the Department of Conservation and the Department of Survey and Land Information.

Surprisingly, Ken Piddington was not appointed to head the Ministry for the Environment, which was charged with the primary responsibility for environmental policy advice; the capacity to provide a strategic view was one of his strengths. Instead he was appointed as the first director-general of conservation at the head of a department bringing together the natural resource management functions of Lands and Survey, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, the Forest Service and Internal Affairs. The ‘green spots’ were to be joined. The director-general carried responsibility for around 2000 staff – in eight regions and 34 districts – nett expenditure of \$106 million and 30% of New Zealand’s land area. This formidable administrative task, constrained by a reduced budget, was approached by Ken and his colleagues ‘with missionary zeal with one arm behind its back’ (Napp, 2007). He was explicit that the new department ‘would shake off the baggage of its parent agencies’.

In 1988 Piddington was headhunted for the newly-created position of director of the environment department at the World Bank (the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development)

in Washington, DC. No position could better employ Ken's diplomatic and environmental experience. In this institution, dominated by economists, only comparatively recently had there been acceptance of the notion that environmental considerations could legitimately be taken into account in assessing the suitability of projects for investment. An important development with which Ken was closely associated was the creation of the Global Environmental Facility to provide funding for global environmental concerns. An account of the establishment negotiations captures Ken's typical approach: 'The Bank should be putting itself in a situation where [it] is not simply reacting to various initiatives, but is taking the lead in putting some of the practical considerations to governments' (Sjoberg, 1994, p.10).

As his close friend and colleague, David McDowell, said in his tribute to Ken at his funeral at Old St Pauls:

He set his legacy in place by helping to mainstream environmental issues in the Bank's work, driving the development of mandatory safeguard policies which required Bank-sponsored projects to have built-in mitigatory and compensatory measures which reduced the social and environmental impacts of large infrastructure projects like dams.

After his 'retirement' to New Zealand in 1992, Ken Piddington became actively involved in energy and climate change

issues, first as adjunct professor at the University of Waikato (where he did considerable work on resource-use taxation) and then as a senior associate of the Institute of Policy Studies at Victoria. An article he wrote for the *New Zealand Herald* in 2001 summed up the position that Ken continued to hold until his death:

There are great dangers ahead for New Zealand in the assumption that we can now return to business as usual. Locally, there are even greater dangers for Auckland if policies are not put in place to head off the creeping effects of the transport crisis, which has made it the country's least-liveable urban area. For the economy at large, there are also costs in avoiding the strategic management of climate change risk. (Piddington, 2001)

Over the past decade Ken published a number of significant articles (for example, Piddington, 2005), made submissions to select committees (for instance, with Professor Frank Scrimgeour of Waikato on the Climate Change (Emissions Trading) Amendment Act 2008), and was an active and respected participant in the Institute of Policy Studies: he acted as IPS coordinator for the successful conference Climate Change and Governance: critical issues for New Zealand and the Pacific in March 2006 and edited the first two editions of *Policy Quarterly*. In recent years Ken devoted time and energy to the

future of the institute, driven by a wish to honour the memory of one of the institute's founders, Sir Frank Holmes, for whom he had great respect.

Ken Piddington maintained his links with the international environmental scene, taking part in successive regional United Nations Environmental Programme meetings of South Pacific and South East Asian heads of environment and conservation departments. Ken was a mentor to many of the participants.

Ken was a friend to so many people in many nations. He was a warm man with a sense of fun; from over 50 years acquaintance, I will recall him as a person with whom, even if paths had not crossed for some time, the friendship of the last occasion was immediately resumed. But at the centre of his life was his family: his beloved wife, Pam (who sadly died in 2006), Graham, Karl, Rosalie and their families. Our thoughts are with them. Ken Piddington is warmly remembered for an outstanding contribution to public welfare in New Zealand and abroad and is sadly missed.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Reeves, Ranginui Walker, Tilly Reedy, Hugh Kawharu, Kara Puketapu, Timoti Sam Karetu, Bruce Stewart, Sid Mead, Rangimarie Rose Pere and Robert Mahuta.

#### Acknowledgements:

Rosalie Piddington, Shonagh Kenderdine, David McDowell

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