OBITUARY – IAN CASTLES

Ian Castles died in Canberra on 2 August 2010 after a short illness. He was aged 75 years and was still very intellectually active at the time of his death. Ian was President of the International Association of Official Statistics (IAOS) for the 1991-93 term.

Ian was born in rural Victoria in 1935. Whilst he undertook his primary education in local schools, he boarded at Wesley College for his secondary education. He undertook university studies at Melbourne University where he was awarded a Bachelor of Commerce. Ian had an intellect of the highest order and certainly had the ability to undertake higher studies but there were higher priorities. Ian married Glenice in 1962 and they had five children. They shared many things together including the pleasures of many ISI Sessions.

He had an outstanding career. Although he only spent some of that time as a statistician, he was always a significant and very well informed user of statistics, even post-retirement.

Ian had an outstanding public career in Australia. Prior to starting at the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), some of his senior positions were Under-Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, where he headed the Economics Division, and Secretary of the Department of Finance from 1979 to 1986. He was appointed to this position at the relatively young age of 44.

He was appointed Australian Statistician, head of the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1986. Some saw this as a downward step from the higher profile Finance Secretary job but Ian saw it as the ideal job. He was now in a position to influence the type of statistics that the ABS produced to support policy analysis. Furthermore, he could influence the way statistics were presented to better support the needs of the user community. This was a desire that remained until his retirement in 1994 even though there were very substantial improvements in the ABS outputs in that time. Certainly the statistical work of the ABS became much more professional under his stewardship. It was not his only contribution – he took every opportunity, both internally and externally, to reinforce the importance of independence, objectivity and integrity.
Ian held many other senior positions in Australia. These include Australian Electoral Commissioner and, post-retirement from the ABS, Executive Director of the Academy of Social Sciences of Australia, a member of the Advisory Board of the Bureau of the Meteorology. At the time of his death, Ian was a Visiting Fellow at the Crawford School of Economics and Government at the Australian National University.

Internationally, he had considerable influence. As mentioned above, he was President of the IAOS. He attended many ISI Sessions and was renowned for asking difficult but insightful questions.

He had considerable influence on international statistics. These include the balance of payments through the IMF Working Group on Capital Flows; the International Comparison Program through a review he undertook for the OECD; and improvements in the accuracy of the data in the Human Development Report (HDR) through his interventions. The latter provides a good example of Ian’s determination that statistics that are widely used are fit for purpose. The authors of the HDR were mainly concerned about advocacy. They were not concerned about the accuracy of the statistics they presented. In fact, you got the feeling that they thought accurate statistics shouldn’t get in the way of a good story. Yet, the statistics in the HDR were used extensively in countries and, because of their inaccuracies, they led to many inaccurate conclusions. Ian was persistent in criticising these statistics through a variety of channels. Ultimately, the authors were forced to take steps to improve the accuracy of the statistics in the publication and a much more useful publication is the result.

His achievements are numerous. Some are mentioned above. Others include his substantial influence on taxation and income support policy during his period at the Department of Finance. It is notable that Ministers attended both his retirement function and his funeral. His forte was analysis of socio-economic data and he led the development of many innovative and influential publications of this genre whilst at the ABS.

He was awarded an Officer of the British Empire (OBE) in 1978 and an Officer of Australia (AO) for his contributions to public policy. Interestingly he never cited is OBE. I think he felt it was superseded by the Australian award. He was also made a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in 1989, a rare award for current public servant.

Ian had many interests. These included research into the information requirements for public policy, the history of economic thought and classical music. He had a great love of numbers. But perhaps above all was his passion for libraries and spent of lot his spare time in libraries. It was fitting that the library at the new ABS building was named in his honour. Indeed he was the first customer – waiting at the door for it to open.

In summing up, Ian had a very high intellect as well as incredible intellectual curiosity. He was almost obsessive about the proper use of statistics and was a regular critic of those that didn’t especially when they were trying to influence public policy. He was able to provide an unusual blend of creative thought and elegant writing. Len Cook, former chief statistician of New Zealand and United Kingdom, said:

"... He was someone who cared deeply about the place of official statistics in public life, and had a special gift for pulling together
the methodological, political, ethical, constitutional and historical dimensions of our work”

He also had great courage and persistence. He was prepared to take on anyone who he thought might be misusing statistics and has a number of ‘scalps’. His criticisms of the statistical work of the International Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) are a good case in point. He continued his arguments, using many channels, even though they were continually rebuffed and there were strident personal attacks. Some even questioned his political motives. Even though Ian showed great interest in the political process he was not politically aligned. He was driven only by the proper use of statistical data. His arguments were not politically convenient so did not get the attention they deserved but hopefully they will lead to better statistical analysis in the next IPCC report.

He has many friends and admirers. His death notice said “A great mind and a generous heart”. I couldn’t think of more appropriate words.

Dennis Trewin