

Two Deaths, Two Gifts

Don Aitkin

Two friends of mine died a week ago. Each of them was notable in his way, each made a difference, and each died too young. Their differing contributions tell us a lot about our diverse university system and the contribution it makes to our country.

Chris Heyde held two chairs at the same time, one at the ANU and the other at Columbia, in New York, and he moved between them each year for a decade or so. Most readers will not have heard of him, but the fact that he held two chairs points to something special, as does the fact that he won a swag of medals in science.

He was a statistician whose field was probability, risk and chance, and stochastic models. Sounds way out? It is, but it underpins a great deal of the normal world we take for granted. Stochastic models are used a good deal in the finance domain, and you could apply them to the current interest in climate change, too.

But Chris Heyde was a man of many parts, not just a supremely good mathematical statistician. He was a fine teacher, and his PhD students have helped to make ANU an international force in his subject, as they hold chairs all over the world.

He was a busy, generous and hard-working man who put a lot of time into the Academy of Science, edited journals, supported professional societies, assisted his parish and mentored young people. He was a member of the Board of the Australian Mathematics Trust, which runs the Australian Mathematics Competition, an event that attracts around half a million kids.

In every arena in which he served Chris was that unusual figure, a participant who had read the papers, spoke carefully and well, and was invariably courteous to others. If there was work to be done as a consequence, Chris was not one who passed the chores on to others. That he found the time to do everything speaks to a surpassing gift for organising oneself.

Peter Cullen, Australia's 'ambassador for water' or more accurately, for the inland river system, was different in style, appearance and background to Chris Heyde, but he too was a man of great energy, intellect and skill. He died on the day Chris's funeral was held.

Peter was a big man whose background was in agricultural science, and he made the management of water his abiding interest when he moved to the University of Canberra (then CCAE) in 1973.

When the Co-operative Research Centre system started in the early 1990s he decided that UC should have one in his field of freshwater ecology and by 1993 he had succeeded. By the time that the Centres of that period were up for review, his Centre had become the model, demonstrating excellent science coupled to national needs and eager partners.

He built on his success to become the man who captured the attention of the then Prime Minister, John Howard, and got him thinking about the inland water system, a subject that John Howard never abandoned during his term. Peter became one of the Commissioners for the National Water Commission, and over the past ten years he played perhaps the most important part in converting the Australian public to a new view, that water is scarce and has to be cherished.

Like Chris Heyde, he garnered a lot of medals and awards for his work. Both were honoured by awards in the Order of Australia, both put a lot of effort into their learned societies, and both were liked by the staff who worked to them.

In style, Peter was blunt where Chris was diplomatic. Peter liked to emphasise his bush work environment in his dress, whereas Chris was always immaculately dressed. Peter was loud, funny and forceful; Chris was quiet, cheerful and forceful.

But both were, in my judgment, great Australians who showed in their lives and their work why our great and diverse higher education system is such a blessing for our country, and why so many students choose to come here.

It was a privilege to have known them both.

[Don Aitkin was at various times the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra, the Chairman of the Board of the Australian Mathematics Trust, and the Chairman of the Australian Research Council.]

March 2008