Obituary

Government Minister who loved trees

Sir Peter Tapsell, 1930-2012

Honorary NZIF member Sir Peter Tapsell passed away on 5 April 2012. He was born on 21 Jan 1930 and died at the age of 82. Born and raised in Rotorua, in 1952 Peter completed medical studies at the University of Otago. After studies overseas, Peter eventually became an orthopaedic specialist at the Rotorua hospital. After several attempts Peter eventually entered parliament in the 1981 election as the Labour Party candidate for the Eastern Maori electorate.

In the Lange Government (1984 - 1992) Peter held many cabinet portfolios – internal affairs, arts, police, defence, civil defence, science and forestry. When Peter held the Minister of Forestry portfolio, I was President of the Institute. Until then I had not had any direct access to ministers. Certainly both being Rotorua-based helped us have many discussions about forestry. Of mutual concern were the changes to forestry taxation inspired by the Minister of Finance (Roger Douglas). On this I formed the opinion (which of course Peter never confirmed) that his thinking was closer to that of the National Party than that of Labour. I remember giving a presentation to the National Party working party on forestry prior to the 1990 General Election. My presentation was in part on the decline in the rate of new planting as result of both Roger Douglas’s forestry taxation changes and the sell-off of the NZ Forest Service plantations. I suggested that a change in forest taxation might trigger in a boom in new plating. Although it was a National Party meeting, Peter was there (by invitation?).

After the 1993 election, the National Party had a majority of only one seat. The appointment of the Speaker, therefore, presented a problem – if National selected a Speaker from among its own ranks, as was traditional, it would lose its majority, since the Speaker was not permitted to vote at that time. Therefore, Prime Minister Jim Bolger decided to offer the Speaker’s position to a member of the Labour Party, thereby retaining the crucial vote. Tapsell was the person chosen by Bolger for this role. (wikipedia – Tapsell). The attached photograph was taken when Sir Peter was speaker.

Sir Peter confided with me that of all the ministerial positions he had held, forestry was the most satisfying. Because of his favourable interest in forestry it was my proposal to award Honorary status to Sir Peter. In addition to being made an Honorary member of this Institute, Sir Peter was awarded many other public honours - KNZM, MBE, FRCS, FRSE.

Dr Wink Sutton

Shelterbelt guru

Peter Smail FNZIF

Peter Smail has left a huge legacy for the New Zealand forestry sector and particularly farm forestry. After leaving school in 1939 and avoiding the banking career that his father had mapped out for him, Peter, the city boy, headed out to the country to start a farming apprenticeship near Methven.

Peter was born into a large Christchurch family who, when he had talked them around, were very supportive of his chosen farming career. For the first three years after leaving school Peter worked as a musterer and general farm hand up the Rakaia Gorge. His love of farming developed then, as did his appreciation of the debilitating effects of the ubiquitous North West wind that blew constantly out of the gorge.

After Japan entered the war Peter, by now a country lad, was drafted into the Canterbury Yeomanry Cavalry, then in the process of retiring horses and moving into light armoured vehicles. The army, which Peter enjoyed, he found a great leveller. Having taught him the intricacies of the Ford V8 motor and how to be a soldier, Peter was asked by his commanding officer whether he wished to be a colonel or a cook. In the event he was manpowered back onto the land to manage two farms near Methven.

During the all too short time before the war changed his plans, Peter threw himself into farming with the vigour that would mark his career. He travelled regularly around the district and indulged with characteristic enthusiasm in all the many rural pursuits the area had to offer.

After the war Peter returned home he married Nan McArthur and continued his farming career at Blyth Downs and then Kakahu. As a returned serviceman and having passed the competence grading for