

## **E. L. ‘Ted’ WHEELWRIGHT**

**1921 - 2007**

Ted Wheelwright, who died in August 2007, was one of the great contributors to Australian political economy. He was a strong critic of orthodox economics, the concentration of corporate power and the failure of Australian economic policy to confront the challenges facing the nation in an increasingly globalised context. He was involved in the struggle to develop political economy courses at the University of Sydney. He supported the establishment of this journal and published an article in its very first issue in 1977.

Ted was teaching and writing about global capitalism decades before the term ‘globalisation’ became fashionable. He warned of its dangers – dependence on foreign investment, economic inequality, environmental degradation, the power of transnational corporations and the undermining of national sovereignty. These prescient warnings proved less influential than the neoliberal ideas, sometimes called economic rationalism, that became the orthodoxy in economic thinking in the last two decades.

His influence was strong, however, both at the University of Sydney and in the wider society. He contributed to the development of the Political Economy program that is still flourishing today at the University, attracting about 400 students annually to the study of economics as a critical social science. As a teacher, he was inspiring, and had an enduring impact on the generations of students he taught between 1952 and 1986 when he retired from the University as Associate Professor of Economics. He was much respected for his authority and clarity, charm and charisma. His students admired, even loved, him for much the same reasons as orthodox economists found his views unsettling.

He was refused promotion to a full professorship at the University on six occasions, despite his outstanding teaching and publications, on the last

occasion sparking a public controversy. Forty parliamentarians signed a petition calling on the University to change its decision. This was in 1975 when the alternative Political Economy course was just beginning and conservatives were still trying to frustrate its development.

Ted's origins were in the UK. He was born in Sheffield and worked as a bank clerk after leaving school. At the outbreak of the second world war he joined the Royal Air Force to fight against fascism, rising to the rank of squadron leader. During the war he flew in Lancasters on bombing raids over Germany and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC). One of his tasks as a navigator was to instruct his fellow fliers about each mission before they took off. He later recalled that was where he learned the essentials of clear teaching. It was, after all, a matter of life and death.

After the war he got an ex-serviceman's scholarship to study economics and political science at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. As a mature-aged student fresh from war service, he knew what he wanted from his studies. He wanted to know what caused war, and why his father – a steelworker - had been out of work for five years during the great depression of the 1930's. He found some answers in a combination of Keynesian, Marxian and institutional economics.

After teaching for two years at the University of Bristol, Ted migrated to Australia to become a lecturer at the University of Sydney in 1952. He developed his research and teaching interests, embracing the analysis of national economic development, international trade, investment and finance, imperialism, the history of economic thought, environmentalism, consumerism and Australian industry. He always stressed that economic policy involves much more than textbook economics – that it is an issue involving ethical judgements and requiring an understanding of the use and abuse of economic power.

His writing consistently exhibited these concerns and characteristics. His first book, published in 1957, was *Ownership and Control of Australian Companies*, based on four years of research into Australian industry, documenting the concentration of corporate power. In 1965 he published *Industrialisation in Malaysia*, drawing on research he had done as a visiting academic in that country, and *The Highest Bidder*. The latter,

written in conjunction with the radical economic historian Brian Fitzpatrick, dissented sharply from the orthodox view that uncontrolled foreign investment would be the best means of developing the Australian economy. A form of economic nationalism was advocated as the preferred basis for more balanced economic development, thereby reducing the dependent relationship on the UK and USA. Although ignored by most academics, the book was later to have some influence on the Whitlam government's attempts to screen proposals for foreign investment.

Ted followed *The Highest Bidder* with *Anatomy of Australian Manufacturing Industry*, written in conjunction with his research assistant, Judith Miskelly. Then, following a visit to the People's Republic of China in 1968, he wrote *The Chinese Road to Socialism*, co-authored by Bruce Macfarlane.

Other volumes of his collected essays on diverse topics followed, published as *Radical Political Economy* (1974) and *Capitalism, Socialism or Barbarism* (1978). He co-edited two volumes of *Readings in Political Economy* (1976), and the five volumes of *Essays in the Political Economy of Australian Capitalism* (1975-1983). The latter series, based on his editorial collaboration with Ken Buckley, the economic historian and civil libertarian, provided a significant outlet for Australian scholarship in political economy. With Ken Buckley, he also wrote two volumes of Australian economic history from a labour perspective, the first volume, *No Paradise for Workers*, covering the period from 1788 to 1914, and the second, *False Paradise*, covering 1915 to 1955.

In 1975 Ted set up the Transnational Corporations Research Project at the University of Sydney, with financial support from the Australian businessman, Trevor Sykes. That institution was a very fruitful vehicle for publications by scholars concerned with analysing what subsequently came to be termed globalisation. It generated 20 books and over 70 research papers on various aspects of transnational capitalism.

Ted produced three further books that sought to synthesise his central concerns about the tensions between global corporate interests and the wellbeing of citizens. *Australia: a Client State*, published in 1982 and

co-authored by Greg Crough, provided a critique of the nation's dependency on foreign corporations – and the strings that were attached. *The Third Wave*, published in 1989 and co-authored by Abe David, emphasised the significance of closer economic relations – through trade, investment and finance – with East Asia. Then came *Oil and World Politics*, published in 1991, which was a powerful study of how the giant corporations controlling oil production and distribution were threatening world peace and the global ecology which sustains humanity.

Beyond academia, Ted was well known as a public intellectual. He was a frequent contributor to media debate, regularly presenting 'Notes on the News' for ABC radio, invariably with some critical insights on current events. Alongside his radical scholarship, teaching and public speaking, Ted was also active in various practical ways to advance the interests of the labour movement, and community interests more generally. He helped to develop the Australian Consumers' Association, the University Cooperative Bookshop, the University of Sydney Staff Club and the Sydney Association of University Teachers (a local forerunner of the National Tertiary Education Union).

Ted was also active in the ALP and in the movement opposing the Vietnam war. In the late 1960s he marched at the head of a demonstration by Veterans Against the War, proudly wearing his DFC and other military service medals.

He was appointed by the Whitlam government to two committees of inquiry – into the future of Australian manufacturing industry and into government procurement policy. He also served on the board of the Commonwealth Bank before it was privatised – a process he vigorously opposed – as well as on the board of the H. V. Evatt Foundation for a decade.

In retirement Ted continued to publish a bi-monthly Political Economy newsletter, with the assistance of Chris Williams, until just two years before his death. Up to that time he also kept physically fit by swimming, with Chris, every morning at Balmoral beach.

The following poem about Ted was written by Stuart Rees, director of the Sydney Peace Foundation, who served alongside Ted on the University of Sydney Senate for many years. Ted was elected as a

Senator by the graduates of the University, and he was also chair of the Senate's finance committee. In those roles he had much contact with former political opponents, such as Bruce Williams, the Vice-Chancellor who had opposed giving administrative recognition to the Political Economy program in the 1970s, and Dame Leonie Kramer, the Chancellor of the University. These names feature in the poem. Stuart read it as a personal tribute to Ted at the event that was held in his memory at the Balmoral Beach Club in September 2007.

A Sheffield lad, a Yorkshire man,  
whose values, thoughts, the ages span  
whose father knew no profit gains  
whose son flew in those bomber planes,  
this guy of substance, ne'er of gloss  
who gained distinguished flying cross,  
whose height gave out a sense of dash,  
who married local Scottish lass.

They left the ol' sod far behind  
to bring down under gifted mind,  
often beyond the classroom reach  
he knew to practice not to preach,  
he saw through all political sham  
from lower wages to Vietnam  
but my words highlight Red Ted's lore -  
when he became a Senator.

The Senate was a scene of tricks  
of academic politics  
to which alumni our Ted sent  
to ask just where the money went.  
'To management, they're all the same  
fired up with worship of the Dame,  
so don't give in, ne'er sign a truce  
and watch that cunning bugger Bruce.'

With this advice he scratched his pate  
'Those right wing think tanks, consider mate  
there's only one thought in their eyes  
they always want to privatize—  
the cleaners' jobs, security  
they've never heard of dignity.'  
Those were his values, honed and set,  
for this we're always in his debt.

This man for justice not for force  
who showed disdain for all out-source  
for public sector kept the faith  
like mentor friend J.K. Galbraith  
and with a small minority  
he maintained solidarity  
and never would the elites please,  
voted against those up front fees.

His laid back image, humorous looks  
still gave space to write lots of books  
from labour history and people unlucky  
in partnership with comrade Buckley,  
to barbarism on those who toil  
to black gold profits made from oil,  
from Australia, client state or slave  
to the panacea of an Asian wave.

This icon man, we still see him  
changing in readiness for his swim  
and with those strokes of pen and arm  
showing his cost effective charm,  
disgust for rich cats on their arse  
respect for guts and working class.

Thank you my friend for a market checked,  
for humour, purpose and intellect,  
thank you also for staying read  
but thank you most for being Ted  
and though you've gone, you still can teach  
from high above Balmoral Beach.

A prize named in Ted Wheelwright's honour is awarded annually to the top student in the introductory Political Economy course at the University of Sydney. Consideration is also being given by the Political Economy Alumni Association to holding an annual Ted Wheelwright lecture at the University.

*Frank Stilwell*