

Obituary: Sir John Ingram, CBE (Kt. Bach.), 1924 – 2015

Prepared by John La Roche including comments from Ingram family members and Dr Nigel Evans



Sir John Ingram passed away on 1st April in his 91st year; he had suffered many years of poor health, but was always fully alert and ready for a good discussion. At his funeral on 8th April at St Marks, Remuera, the church and hall were packed with the many people whose lives had been enriched by Sir John. Eulogies were from George Blake of Waipahi, John Forbes from Taharoa C, the Principal of Nelson College, Gary O'Shea, daughter Nichola Christie and NZ Steel colleague Dr. Nigel Evans. Sir John's support for the Waipahi Whanau and Mere Mere Trust was acknowledged by George Blake. It was on their land on the shores of Lake Taupo that the Ingram family enjoyed many annual holidays. John Forbes spoke highly of Sir John's support for the people of Taharoa and the Ngati Mahuta and the positive collaboration between New Zealand Steel and Taharoa C which led to the mining of ironsand. Nigel Evans spoke of the many challenges Sir

John had to face in his professional life, particularly at New Zealand Steel. The eulogies were completed by grandchildren, who described many happy family occasions with their 'Pa',

Sir John and twin sister Jean were born on 3 September 1924 in Nelson. After attending Nelson College, John was called up in November 1942 to serve in the armed forces. He joined the Air Force serving as a flight mechanic at Los Negros Island in the Admiralty Islands. On his return in 1945, John applied and was awarded a 'rehab bursary' to study engineering at Canterbury University. It was here that he met Rosemary and they became engaged in 1949 when he had completed his BE (Mechanical) degree.

John's first job after graduation was with the Public Works Department, initially in Nelson and then at Roxburgh Hydro where Rosemary joined him after their marriage to live in a 42 m² PWD house. Then, in 1952, Boving & Co Australasia offered him a position and he moved to Melbourne becoming Managing Director in 1954. By 1962 John was keen to return to New Zealand with Rosemary and his three young daughters; he accepted the position of Chief Engineer at Cable Price Corporation Ltd and three months later he was appointed Managing Director. John's work at Cable Price involved him in many aspects of importing machinery and steel products. It was on a visit to Japan in 1962 that he visited Toyota head office securing a dealership and the importation of the first Toyota vehicle into New Zealand.

In 1969 John was appointed General Manager and soon after Managing Director of New Zealand Steel. At the time of his appointment the new steel-making plant from Stelco-Lurgi-Republic Steel-National Lead was almost ready for commissioning. The plant was designed by overseas consultants after pilot trials on iron sand shipped from New Zealand. But after commissioning, it did not work! Nigel Evans said in his eulogy "This was John's first big test and he held his nerve. His engineering experience and his trust in his own people's advice, gave him the confidence to tell the overseas experts to pack their bags. Adoption of their proposal would have sunk any plans for future expansion and, just as surely, consigned the iron making operation to the already long list of failed iron sand ventures. By contrast, the success of the elegant in-house process implemented in 1972, unlocked the technology door for the future plant expansion."

It was Dr Nigel Evans, Dr Richard Cooper and Peter Bates who studied all the problems and re-designed the process. By 1981, after lengthy pilot trials, it was shown that the revised process worked and could prove a good rate of return for shareholders and New Zealand.

When an expanded plant of 700,000 tonnes per annum was well underway, a snap election in 1984 saw Roger Douglas become Minister of Finance. Agreements of the previous government were dishonoured and in line with the government policy of privatisation, in 1987 New Zealand Steel was sold to Equitcorp Ltd. Two years later this company was placed in receivership. A buyer was sought and the Australian company, BHP finally took over the plant.

Although Sir John retired in 1987 after extremely turbulent and stressful years, he is still revered by all at New Zealand Steel as the one who saved company. It was his sound technical understanding and management through very difficult times that has made it one of the most efficient steel plants in the world.

Sir John was passionate about the engineering profession and the role of engineers in society. He was very involved with the Institution of Professional Engineers becoming President in 1976-77. His service was recognised by being elected a Distinguished Fellow in 1997. He was author of nine technical papers on a range of topics. He was a Fellow of the Australian Institute of Mining, a Fellow of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers and a Fellow of the Institution of Directors, being elected a Distinguished Fellow of this institute in 2004. Sir John was a Director of eight companies for various periods during his career and well into retirement. In 1999 he was awarded a Distinguished Alumnus of Canterbury University and made a Fellow of The University of Auckland in 1997.

Throughout his career, Sir John was very active in many community organisations. Just a few of these include 11 years as Chair of the Bishop of Auckland Foundation Appeal, 8 years as a member of the Auckland War Memorial Museum Council, 17 years on the Council University of Auckland including three as Pro Chancellor, 10 years as Trustee and Board member of Spectrum Care which moved disabled children from Mangere Hospital into houses in the community, 10 years as Chair of the Energy and Environment Committee of the Manufacturers Federation, 7 years as a Trustee of World Wildlife Fund New Zealand, 10 years as Chair of Trustees Youth Skills New Zealand, 16 years IPENZ National Heritage Committee, 11 years Board member Auckland Agricultural Pastoral & Industrial Shows Board, 13 years Patron of Water for Survival and 12 years Patron of Register of Engineers for Disaster Relief. John was also very involved in the schools where his daughters were educated, including two years as President of Marsden School Parents Association and 10 years as a Board member of Diocesan School for Girls. A major contribution was John's 11 years as the foundation chairman of Auckland UniServices, which he grew into an outstandingly successful commercial research arm of the university.

In 1992 Sir John was invited to become a member of the Waitangi Tribunal. His involvement with Maori at Taharoa, Port Waikato and Waipahi had given him much insight into the injustice suffered by Maori. He made a point of speaking to community groups, often with some members who were sceptical regarding the need for Treaty settlements. Sir John served as a member of the Tribunal for six years.

He received the Honour, Knight Bachelor in 1994 preceded by CBE (Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) in 1984. Sir John supported by his ever loving wife Lady Ingram, has contributed enormously to New Zealand's social and economic progress. He was always a very humble man and one who related easily to everyone he met from all walks of life.