

Professor Sir Kenneth (John Wilson) Alexander

Kenneth Alexander was a man of his time – academic, social scientist, political activist, businessman, administrator and statesman. In the turbulent years from 1950 to 2000, he was in the thick of it. Throughout, he was big enough to meet the challenges, to ride out the storms and to rise above the gratuitous jealousies, pettiness and crossfire that attend all men of action, especially academic men of action.

Sir Kenneth was an academic and educator prepared to apply his knowledge to the outside world. He was also a socialist and, when it was not popular to be so, an advocate of the Scottish dimension. He stood for change, for evolution and carried into the Highlands and Islands of Scotland his convictions that the future held not fear but promise. He finally took this experience and warmth of character into the then new University of Stirling. In his long life, he saw the comings and goings of many new Jerusalems, culminating in Scotland's devolution to a near independent nation.

A Keynesian economist, he was never a toady to theory and never afraid to stand his ground in defence of what he believed to be true. He had all the qualifications for membership of this Society. Educated at George Heriots, and Dundee University, he researched at Leeds and lectured at Sheffield and Aberdeen before becoming Professor of Economics at the then new University of Strathclyde. He was the first dean of the first business school in Scotland.

Not bad for one life but there was much more in store. Unlike many academics of his day, he sought to put his talents and his experience to useful purpose. As a reformer he knew that to get anything done it was essential to step into the political arena. There his keen brain, clear head and good heart drew him into the cockpit of Scotland's post-war agonies.

He became a board-member of the Clydeside shipbuilding companies, Fairfields and Upper Clyde shipbuilders. Later still, he became Chairman of Govan Shipbuilders. Here indeed was a bed of nails and an intellectual challenge second to none. How was job security to remain wedded to market forces? Given the deeply held prejudices of everyone involved in this titanic struggle there was no solution to this or to any other of Britain's industrial problems. Somewhere along the line the analytical brains of the political theorists had broken loose from the social experience of the work force. For all his trying, Kenneth Alexander's beliefs in the promise of new technologies and union-management cooperation were to be frustrated by the familiar conservative forces of the left and right.

However, because of his sentiments, he was the obvious choice for another workforce to lead the Campaign for the Defence of the Steel Industry in Scotland. That also came to nothing, those opposing him having already made up their minds that Ravenscraig should close. Was it necessary for Scottish manufacturing industry to haemorrhage to death? Kenneth Alexander thought not and in that persistently positive frame of mind, he was appointed to succeed Sir Robert Grieve as Chairman of HIDB, the Highlands and Islands Development Board, there to leave his mark on another episode of Scotland's 20th Century.

The Highlands and Islands had always been on the fringe of a nation, itself on the fringe of its big southern neighbour which in turn is on the fringe of Europe. Distance had not yet been conquered by the information technology and communications revolution but Kenneth Alexander brought a new face, fresh optimism and humanity to bear on another aspect of the regeneration of Scotland. He was an advocate of its music and other arts. This was to be a turning point and out of the seeds sown there would emerge a stemming of the then population outflow, together with the enhancement of further education and, in the end, the creation of the embryonic University of the Highlands & Islands.

He was the obvious choice to pilot HIDB. He knew the Highlands and he was well schooled in developmental economics. Again there would be opposition to top-down efforts to revitalise ancient customs and ancient attitudes and there was a new prime minister on the warpath.

After four years of economic planning, Sir Kenneth, as he now was, left the Highlands to take up yet another challenge which would involve all his political skills. In 1982 he was appointed Principal & Vice-Chancellor of the still new University of Stirling. It was not a good time to be entering university administration. The infamous letter from the University Funding Council, which sealed the fate of the older, benign University Grants Committee, imposed massive financial cuts which were arbitrary and selective. A young university still finding its feet was vulnerable. There were whispers of closure of

more than one Scottish university. This clumsy act destroyed a collegiality which had held the university community together over the centuries. It required someone of Sir Kenneth's confidence and experience to steer Stirling into safer waters, which he surely did.

And then there was an even more far-reaching discussion to which he was a party. In the mid-1980s the Scottish Office had established a new body, STEAC, the Scottish Tertiary Education Advisory Council. Chaired by Sir Donald McCallum, it sought the view of the Scottish universities as to whether they should look south to London for succour and inspiration or north to Edinburgh. Option 6 of the study which advocated closer ties with home was supported by only three of the eight universities namely Stirling, Strathclyde and Glasgow. The option was therefore defeated but the arguments for a more Scottish university system were noted and minuted. They would resurface 20 years later when devolution swept up the whole of Scottish education into a North-of-the-Border empire. Still some universities look south for salvation, but Kenneth Alexander did not.

When he stepped down from Stirling it was to climb one more rung of the academic ladder to become Chancellor of Aberdeen University, another prickly patch but well within his ability to manage. A far cry from the Glasgow shipyards. In his life, Kenneth Alexander served many bodies and gave much advice. In between times, and to enshrine his academic credentials, he wrote several books and articles about industrial change and political economy. He received many distinctions and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1978.

Throughout, he was knowingly supported by his consort Angela who was always at his side but seldom in the footlights. She and their five children gave Kenneth Alexander the greatest pleasure.

He led a consummate life which was a personal denial of the allegation, often levelled at academics, that they are irrelevant, if not useless, to the outside world. Kenneth Alexander had no inhibitions. His fellow academics could 'tut tut' but he was always ready to stand his ground.

Polymaths are now out of fashion. Perhaps they always were. On his own terms, Kenneth Alexander was such a person. He was born on 14th March 1922 and died on the 27th March 2001. He led a full life.

Sir Graham Hills

Professor Sir Kenneth (John Wilson) Alexander

Sir Kenneth Alexander was a wise and practical man for all the people. He once said: "walking the streets of the towns and villages of your native land keeps your feet and your thoughts firmly on the ground of reality". So it was in his life as Student, Lecturer, Director, University Chancellor, and, not least, as a caring husband and father. But, irrespective of his work at any time, he was above all a practical educator, and the man and his role came together in harmony.

After his wartime service in the R.A.F. he studied at Dundee's Bonar School of Economics, culminating in an outstanding external degree from London University (1949). Marriage followed, and then he became, in order, a research assistant at Leeds, a lecturer at Sheffield, a lecturer at Aberdeen, before being appointed to a new chair of economics at Strathclyde and Dean of the Scottish Business School. In his teaching of economics he was sceptical of the undue emphasis that was being placed on mathematical certainty; not surprisingly, what was increasingly regarded as his desirable common-sense in solving practical problems was quickly recognised.

The Trade Union movement had noted this early in his career, and, as an example, it seemed quite natural that Kenneth Alexander should represent miners on the National Coal Board's industrial relations Tribunal: or that he taught members of the Transport and General how to use a slide rule!

It soon became widely accepted in Scotland that if there was a serious difficulty to be solved, especially where politics intruded and widespread agreement was required, the call went out for Professor Alexander. The 1960s and 70s were an uncertain time for shipbuilding. He was appointed a non-executive director of Fairfields (Glasgow), and did much to help it continue in business. When the Government took it over it was no surprise that he should become Chairman from 1974 to 1976.

In 1976 he was given leave from Strathclyde to chair the Highland and Islands Development Board. The major (and continuing) problem was highland land use, a matter which never seems to attract solutions. Helpfully Sir Kenneth (Knighted 1978) had the strength of acceptance across the political spectrum, not least because of his belief in rational argument and his honesty of purpose.

These qualities were equally required when he became Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Stirling, at the time a fine-looking University with an uncertain reputation. Sir Kenneth, with a splendid grasp of the circumstances and his wise and steady leadership, did much to save from extinction what is now a substantial jewel in the education crown. This was yet another example of his ability to get things right, and mirrors his report on adult education in Scotland which is the guiding light for community learning in Scotland.

Then followed, from 1986, a decade as Chancellor of the University of Aberdeen. It was a return to a seat of learning for which he had a great regard. Like so many universities, Aberdeen was going through a trying period arising from a reduction in grants; in his inimitable way he prodded the University to plan fully and sensibly for its quincentenary.

In between times Sir Kenneth gave willingly and vigorously to the work of a large number of public bodies, among them the Scottish Development Agency, the Technical Change centre, the Saltire Society and the National Museums of Scotland.

Helpfully, Sir Kenneth did not neglect the private sector, although his directorships were few and carefully chosen. In his busy life he was a positive contributor to Scottish Television, the Scottish *Daily Record* and *Sunday Mail* group, and Stakis Plc.

The amazing amount of work Sir Kenneth was asked to undertake and successfully completed, often under difficult circumstances, is clear proof of his dedication to his fellow men and women. What should never be forgotten is how kindly, courteous and good-humoured he was in the midst of all his remarkable achievements. Needless to say in everything he did he was greatly helped by marrying the right lady and having a supportive family.

Sir Campbell Fraser

Kenneth (John Wilson) Alexander. Kt, DL, BSc(Dundee), HonLLD (CNA, Aberdeen, Strathclyde, Dundee), DUniv(Stirling, Open), Hon DLitt (Aberdeen, Heriot-Watt). RSE Committee Service: Councillor, 1990-93; Vice-President, 1993-1996. Born 14 March 1922; elected FRSE 6 March 1978; Died 27 March 2001.