



## **EULOGY**

### **David Asimus, AO**

by

**Mr Ian Macintosh, AM**  
**former Deputy Chancellor (2nd October 2003 - 30 June 2007)**

I suspect that David's parents, Carl and Muriel, had no idea when he was born in Tumut 75 years ago, that they had launched someone into the fast lane for high achievers.

David indeed started to show his potential to become a great Australian early in his life. He was Captain of Barker College and head boy of St Paul's College at Sydney University, where he studied Economics.

His early lifelong interest in horse racing probably started at University. In 1951 the Sunday Telegraph records – with pictures - that between races during the Spring racing carnival at Royal Randwick, a single horse with a colourful jockey on board followed by the Clerk of the Course made a dash for the winning post.

Sadly it collapsed just short of the post with its legs in the air, and the police led the four university students off the track. No charges were laid but the Telegraph reported that "David Asimus was the horse's hind quarters".

David grew up on the family farm at Gundagai and farmed very successfully for many years, winning a Nuffield Farming Scholarship in 1958, and never lost his love for and interest in rural Australia.

Trying to encapsulate David's incredibly diverse and productive life has provided me with a premature opportunity to admire this great contribution to Australia by a very good friend of more than 40 years.

I imagine him as a very large five pointed star with a bright pulsating light in the middle. At each point of the star is a significant but different part of his life – the light in the middle, his personality, love of people, life and family.

The first star point represents the Australian wool industry and his Chairmanship of the Australian Wool Corporation and International Wool Secretariat from 1979 to 1988. He reorganised and modernised both organisations, starting at a time when the industry was at a low ebb and quite divided, but still very important to Australia.

In 1988 he was responsible for one of the most impressive wool promotion functions ever held – the bringing together of most of the world’s leading fashion designers and hosting Prince Charles and Princess Di at the Sydney Opera House – this attracted world wide attention to wool as a multi purpose fashion fibre.

I well remember David being so excited by the opportunities at the AWC that while he was telling me about these he drove straight through a red light in Melbourne’s CBD.

He was without doubt the ideal person to lead the wool industry, both locally and internationally, at that time. He gained great respect from overseas wool clients, and was adored by the staff at the head office in Melbourne.

The second star point is his wide ranging and spectacular corporate career as a company director.

David’s range of interests and knowledge was extraordinary, from mining (BHP) to media (Rural Press), to finance (Industrial Bank of Japan) to power generation (Delta Electricity) and insurance (Australia Eagle Insurance), and of course primary industry.

Some years ago Sir James Balderstone, Chairman BHP, said to me that David brought enormous international insight to the board.

The Late Harry Perkins, Chairman of Westfarmers, said David always asked the most pertinent question – one which everyone else had overlooked.

John Fairfax, Chairman, Rural Press, said simply he was the best director on his board.

The next star point highlights his contribution to public life in areas which included Austrade between 1987 – 1992, the Australian Government’s international trade promotion and facilitations arm.

He was also a member of the Board of the CSIRO, the Australia/Japan Foundation and Australia/Japan Business Co-operation Committee.

He was Chairman of the Australia Rural Leaders Foundation and the Marcus Oldham Foundation, both now established as leaders in rural education.

He also conducted various Government enquires in areas such as shipping and regional development.

David cut his teeth if you like, on organisations such as the Tumut Dairy Co-op and the Council then the Executive of the NSW Graziers’ Association.

In those grazier days his attention span was already quite short and if the debate looked like being a little uninteresting, David would go from Circular Quay to Manly and back on the ferry. This he said was good for the soul and allowed him to think without interruption.

Then comes education, specifically CSU – which I think David would regard as his most important project and probably his most enjoyable and absorbing role.

He was elected Foundation Chancellor in 1989 and retired in 2002. CSU has become Australia’s leading inland Uni and its student population grew from around 10,000 in 1990 to almost 40,000 today, making it about the seventh biggest university in Australia in student numbers.

However, all was not completely smooth sailing. After his initial appointment, the first task given to him by the Council was to produce a paper recommending where the headquarters should be.

He and the Vice Chancellor, Professor Cliff Blake, as you would expect put together an excellent and well researched paper in favour of Wagga as the headquarters.

However the final decision made by the Council was in favour of Bathurst. As a result David then offered his resignation – which of course was rejected – welcome David to academic politics!

This also was probably the only defeat he ever had on CSU Council and he rapidly established a very high level of mutual respect and admiration for the university staff which persisted well after his retirement.

Throughout his life David's dedication to any job he undertook was exemplary and his travelling schedule was such that you wonder how he had time for meetings.

At CSU during his 12 years there were over 70 Council meetings and he never missed one. In the last year or two there were up to 23 graduation ceremonies annually, as far apart as Manchester, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Toronto and Auckland, as well as seven regional campuses in Australia. David missed very few of these – yet he was still also on a number of major boards which met in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth – where again he never missed a meeting. The CSU Chancellor ship is of course an honorary position.

In Cliff Blake's words, David was a master of the short, impromptu speech, which held the audience's attention, sent a strong message chosen for that audience, but always lightened by humour.

David, of course, was not averse to a good argument – or even a good political fight. He chastised a number of senior officials for not including the Orange Ag College in the original CSU structure. Orange was joined to New England Uni and when that failed to Sydney Uni. That also failed and Orange is now a vibrant part of CSU – David was right, but it took almost 15 years for that to be recognised.

There is no doubt and plenty of evidence that the leadership and vision David provided to CSU has set it on the path to being one of Australia's most respected and successful tertiary institutions.

The last star point twinkles because of David's character that underpins his life.

His public style and dignity, his friendly formality, his impeccable honesty and sense of public propriety and his scrupulous punctuality formed his base.

He believed passionately in Australia and its rural industries and its people and of course, made the eastern Riverina his lifelong home.

Yet he mixed freely with city- based and foreign business people and social groups. It was this bridge which helped make him so effective for CSU and in the corporate world.

Lurking just under the surface, however, was another person who sometimes escaped. He loved the ceremony of graduation and he loved to put on the Chancellor's robes and compete with some of the local mayors whose robes he believed were inferior in style, colour and texture.

David, in a ceremonial kimono or Chancellor's robe was indeed an awesome sight and some hint of his early acting star performances with the Gundagai Amateur Dramatic Society would emerge.

And finally, in the centre of this star flashing away all the time was a man of enormous energy, enthusiasm, who cared deeply about his family, his friends, his community and his country.

He was recognised in countless ways by his peers, with an AO which in my view was insufficient, three honorary degrees and voted Australian of the Year in 1988.

He loved his golf and all forms of sport, an occasional punt and red wine and was impatient with cant and hypocrisy, but above all I think he liked to stir. His idea of a successful dinner party was to initiate at least two good arguments during the evening.

But deep down he also had a soft centre, his hospitality was legendary although he was known to invite people for dinner and not only forget to tell Jane, but forget altogether.

In all I have said, David was sure to emphasise that he could not have done everything he did without the unrelenting support and love of Jane and his family.

So this is why I have characterised David as a large shining star – he will be there for all to see and to follow for a long time.

**Ian Macintosh AM**  
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