

# Government Minister who loved trees

**Sir Peter Tapsell, 1930-2012**

**H**onorary 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.



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 planting. Although it was a National Party meeting, Peter was there (by invitation?).

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

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.

Peter was called back to the army, sent overseas, and ended the war in Europe with his tank in Trieste. As a 21-year old he took the opportunity to have a look around Italy before he was sent to Japan as a member of the Commonwealth Occupation Force where again his passion for things rural encouraged him to take a keen interest in Japan's agricultural production.

When 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



*Peter Smail & Arthur Cooney*

farming in Canterbury and Taupo to North Auckland, Peter was eligible for a rehab block of land so in 1953 put his name forward. He was offered land being developed around Taupo but opted to try his luck with a block to be balloted at Te Pirita. He won the ballot for Lynton, a 572 ha property, which he described as being predominantly in native grasses with stunted silver tussocks, matagouri and dead manuka but having been lightly grazed which hid the stones. Peter regarded this as an exciting challenge.

It was with considerable pride and satisfaction that in later years Peter would recall the Valuation Department's recommendation that he cut the sheep carried on his 572 ha block from 1250 to 950. By the time he sold the property it had been developed, by a combination of thoughtful and careful husbandry, fertilizers and shelter, to carry 4,500 stock units.

While animals were always Peter's main focus he was very aware that their well being depended on pasture quality, the result of attention to both soils and to the total environment.

Early in his farming days Peter realised that the way to get the best from his exposed and very windy farm was to plant trees. Shelter became his catch word and was almost an obsession. Lynton was carefully planted with trees to ameliorate the effects of both the south west and nor' west winds. His main species was radiata pine, which early on he determined should be tended to obtain the highest quality timber when the shelter belts were mature and required harvesting. He practised a form of permeable shelter realising that to stop the nor' west wind was an impossible task but to break down its worst effects was essential to ensure best pasture growth and stock shelter in the dry windy Te Pirita environment. Several blocks of radiata were also planted on the property and he would, with considerable pride, demonstrate the use of these forests as stock shelter in adverse weather conditions.

Peter was an experimenter and besides radiata pine planted a wealth of other species for timber, shelter and food for both the stock and the wildlife that became an integral part of Lynton. By the time that he retired Lynton, despite the difficult climate, was yielding high quality farm and forest produce, the result of his never ending quest for excellence in everything that he produced. Peter was a marketer and businessman who realised that there was no substitute for quality. He even tried to grow a square radiata pine with the help of some Dexion panelling bolted on to several uncomplaining radiata pine trees.

Peter was a communicator who enjoyed nothing more than to show what he had achieved on his farm, to discuss why and what he was doing, and to give advice to anyone who expressed even a modicum of interest. His shelter expertise, particularly on the Canterbury plains, was keenly sought and he regularly lectured to Lincoln University students. He was a member of the National Shelter Working Party, and in 1974-75 a foundation member of the afforestation working party of the Forestry Council.

He gave freely of his time to the Farm Forestry Association of which he was a founding member, at one time its president and was awarded an honorary life membership for his enthusiastic contribution. He spent 16 years as a member of the Selwyn Plantation Board, the last six as Chairman. He was a member of the Orton Bradley Park Board for 13 years. Peter published at least fourteen papers with titles ranging from "The need for Shelter", "Grass versus Trees – the unequal Battle", "Shelter for Profit", to "Leyland Cypress Trials".

Peter's considerable achievements were recognised by the New Zealand Institute of Forestry with the award of an Honorary Membership in 1980, a Fellowship in 1988, Forester of the year 1989, and in 1992 The Kirk Horn Flask the Institute's prize awarded every two years "to recognize outstanding contributions in the field of forestry in New Zealand".

Peter's expertise, particularly in farm forestry, is well known and respected both at home and abroad. He remained a very successful farmer throughout his working life and, until he retired in 1992, was intimately involved in the day-to-day running of his farm. Everything he did with forestry was aimed at improving farm practice and increasing production. His close involvement and commitment to farming made him a very credible advocate to other farmers and enabled him to have a great impact in persuading the wider farming community of the benefits to be obtained from wise farm forestry.

Peter will be long remembered for his unreserved enthusiasm and contribution to forestry. His farm, Lynton, was his pride and joy and a real credit to his love and respect for all aspects of the land.

**Bill Studholme**