
OBITUARY

Graham Larcombe

Graham Larcombe was a committed political economist, concerned with improving the material conditions of people where they live and work. Born in 1952, he died in January 2015, aged 62, having succumbed to melanoma. Graham was an progressive public intellectual who was ever curious, enthusiastic and good-humoured. His professional life was extraordinary in the breadth of both his work and his life-long commitment to progressive values and causes. He deserves to be remembered and his achievement acknowledged.

Graham undertook an economics degree at the University of Sydney in the early 1970s and became involved with the critical political economy movement that was developing at that time. He was elected Secretary of the Australian Political Economy Movement (APEM) after the formation of that national organization, which began publishing this journal in 1977. He later enhanced his education with Masters degrees in urban and environmental studies at Macquarie University and economics at Melbourne University.

One of Graham's first jobs was as a research assistant for Frank Stilwell at Sydney University. Their collaboration culminated in the publication of *Economic Crisis, Cities and Regions* (1980), a book that explored how global political economic processes and national policies were affecting employment and income opportunities in different Australian localities.

Graham's lifetime focus was on sustainable industry development, job creation, skill formation and training. Later his work acquired a 'green' orientation. Ever present was the spatial dimension, largely absent from mainstream economics but crucial in understanding urban, rural and regional development. With an orientation towards the coordination of private and public initiatives (creating a 'virtuous circle' of development), instead of processes shaped by *laissez faire* and/or vested interests, the parameters and implications of space were ever present in his work.

Graham worked as a public servant in planning-related Departments in NSW and Victoria (1982-89). Subsequently he consulted for government instrumentalities at many levels, as well as for civic and private organisations and unions.

Graham perennially worked in collaboration with others. His first long-term collaboration was with Warwick Richards at Economic & Energy Analysis Pty Ltd (EEA) from 1990-96. At EEA Graham consulted on industry development, infrastructure and urban and regional planning. Together Graham and Warwick put together and led a consortium of ten Australian companies who worked collaboratively with the power utilities in North, South and Central Vietnam with the objective of developing opportunities for shared Australia-Vietnamese participation in technology transfer, training and equipment exports in the emerging power transmission and distribution sectors in Vietnam. Graham played a leading role in another ambitious international EEA project which worked to consolidate and strengthen a progressive South African economic think tank in Johannesburg at the time of the election of the first ANC Government in South Africa.

From 1996-2002, Graham was the Sydney arm of Peter Brain's Melbourne-based National Institute of Economic and Industry Research. In that capacity, Graham initiated and oversaw a large 'State of the Regions' report for the NSW Local Government Association, producing a key document for the LGA's annual conference. It documented the socio-economic character of each region, providing a substantive basis for civic or policy action. This linkage also resulted in a 2000 report, *A Framework for Whole of State Development*. At the same time, Graham produced a report for the NSW Far West Western Management Catchment Area Committee, *Necessary Conditions and Options for Socio-economic Advancement*.

There was a bitter dénouement to this previously close personal and professional relationship when Brain accused Graham of stealing intellectual property. A law suit was settled in Graham's favour. Subsequently Graham worked independently as a consultant under the rubric of Strategic Economics. Among the commissioned reports he prepared were *Paying for Private Profit* (2004); *Financing our Future: the case for change in the financing of Australia's infrastructure needs* (2005); *Adelaide Futures Project: Developing a Robust Economy*, (2007); *Proposed Training Service Models for Industry Sub-sectors* (2009); *The*

Future of Clyde Refinery (2011); and *The Australian Resources Boom: Sharing the Benefits* (2013). Graham was also invited by the OECD, in its Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) Program, to be a lead consultant on strategies for sustainable local development, producing reports on *Climate Change, Employment and Local Development* (2011), and *Enabling Local Green Growth: Addressing Climate Change Effects on Employment and Local Development* (2012). Latterly, he also spent time in China in a team with a comparable orientation (green strategies for sustainable local development). He was the only non-Chinese member of the team – highlighting the respect in which he was held.

Graham was also actively involved in the politics of his own locale – the Wollongong-centred south coast of NSW. The area, a Labor fiefdom and long steeped in corruption, has been ripe for grass roots activism.

In his longtime involvement as a public servant, consultant and activist, Graham was immersed in the politics of the arenas in which he has developed expertise (both in Australia and overseas). Graham's analytical ability and statistical capacity were complemented by a political savvy acquired from observing the political process at close hand. He became deeply knowledgeable of the power imbalances and embedded cultures which heavily constrain and channel options.

Representative of this engagement was his experience first as consultant and then as planning director (2002-04) at Liverpool Council in Western Sydney. The Liverpool area had long been the bailiwick of industrial heavyweights – for example, ABB, Alcatel (which took over STC), Metal Manufacturers (later taken over by Pirelli) and Phillips. But most of the Liverpool plants had succumbed to the global strategies of their parents and the indifferent policies of Australian governments, with the plants either being closed down or restricted to minor operations. Graham worked valiantly to build linkages in the industrial and services structure of the Liverpool area, seeking to bypass the longtime 'silos' in which companies, large and small, had previously operated, and to facilitate 'clusters'. At the time he thought that a telecommunications cluster had the most likely prospect of success. But he was confronted by contrary politics in multiple forms. Representative was a move by Chris Corrigan, CEO of the then stevedore Patrick Corporation, to overwhelm the Liverpool area with a transport hub, leveraging his influence with the Howard federal government. The hub would have had little local

linkages with minimal employment impact. At the same time, the federal government was attempting to sell off Defence Department land indiscriminately, motivated crudely by budgetary considerations. There was little productive assistance from the NSW Department of State and Regional Development, reflective of an impoverished vision long entrenched in this NSW portfolio.

Graham was a lateral thinker who identified regenerative and distributive possibilities that other 'experts' failed to perceive or chose to ignore. His mature work harnessed his enduring creativity to a rich multi-disciplinary analytical framework which reflected his values and vision. To Graham 'industrial development, job creation, skill formation and training' were not dry academic areas for research but arenas for creative enquiry with outcomes involving real people.

He was never discouraged by the policy inertia of governments. Graham worked assiduously to build collaboration between stakeholders in business, unions and government who could be persuaded to share his vision of how creative spatial planning might turn around social disadvantage and industrial decline. While statistical and demographic analysis sharpened the focus of his analysis, creative possibilities were always at the heart of his work. He was a natural networker and his enthusiasm was often infectious. Graham succeeded in winning the respect and fostering collaboration of many people in business, labour organisations and local government who, to most economists, would have seemed improbable allies.

He also became an accomplished public speaker on political economic topics of current concern, sharing his knowledge with diverse audiences and always willing to contribute to events such as those organised in Australia by the SEARCH Foundation.

With his personal warmth and professional skills, Graham was indefatigable in his support of progressive causes. His untimely death was a great loss not only to his family and many friends, but to all those who worked with him in his rich professional life. He will be missed.

Graham's memory will be perpetuated by a graduate scholarship, established in his name by SGS Consulting, within the Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning at the University of Melbourne.

Written by Evan Jones, Frank Stilwell and Warwick Richards