

In honour of Sir Guy Powles

A dinner in honour of Sir Guy Powles was held in Parliament Buildings on Monday 24 November 1986. It was hosted by the Rt. Hon. G. W. R. Palmer, Minister of Justice. The Rt. Hon. Sir Owen Woodhouse, President of the Law Commission presented the address in honour.

First, Minister, I must thank you for your generous invitation to have this dinner in honour of Sir Guy Powles in this building and, so to speak, under your own baton. This venue for such an occasion is a special compliment to the work of the New Zealand Section of the International Commission of Jurists, and one which all its members value. At the same time it is a particularly graceful tribute, if I may so say, to Sir Guy Powles himself. I say this not simply because of his valuable guidance as a truly active New Zealand President of the Section for the past eight years, nor because of the particular distinction he has earned as first New Zealand member of the permanent International Commission, but rather because this environment and its parliamentary setting seems so fitting in the case of a man who has given devoted and unqualified support throughout a long and varied career to our democratic institutions.

I speak of a long career. In fact that use of the word career in the singular is hardly the way to describe the work of a man who has moved without pause for breath from one busy field of activity to the next and then to another and then to yet another again. For twelve years, after graduating LL.B. at Victoria University College, he was in practice in Wellington as a barrister with a lecturing stint in practice and procedure on the side. Then, with the arrival of World War II he followed in the footsteps of a military father — a father it should be mentioned who served in South Africa during the Boer War, saw active service overseas during the whole period of the First World War and not content with that occupied himself in the Second World War as commandant at Waiouru Military Camp. So Sir Guy joined the Army Staff College from which he emerged five years later with the rank of full colonel having seen three years' active service overseas with the Third Division in the Pacific. There is reference in some contemporary New Zealand papers to the part played by Colonel Powles on behalf of New Zealand in the negotiations leading up to the surrender of the Japanese at the end of World War II although some who were present were not surprised to find that General McArthur insisted on grabbing most of the limelight. At that point he left this second career with the army in order to take up a third in the New Zealand foreign service.

During the years 1946 to 1948 Sir Guy filled the important role of counsellor with the New Zealand Legation in Washington, and then he was appointed first New Zealand High Commissioner to the newly established trust territory of Western Samoa. With characteristic attention to the needs of the people of that small island nation he then had a considerable part to play in bringing Western Samoa to full independence. The presence with us tonight of His Excellency the High Commissioner is a mark of the great respect in which he is still held in that independent state.

In 1960 Sir Guy became High Commissioner to India and Ceylon and Ambassador to the neighbouring state of Nepal. By 1962 he had been awarded a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George (C.M.G.) and became a Knight Commander of the British Empire.

By then Sir Guy and Lady Powles had been living in a tropical climate for about fourteen years and they decided the time had arrived to return to New Zealand and home. It was the very moment when decisions were being taken to appoint our first Ombudsman, and again, without pausing, Sir Guy Powles moved from the foreign service into this new and extremely important post which he proceeded to fill with the greatest distinction for the next fifteen years until 1977.

Handled without balance and sensitivity the whole concept would have been broken. As it is, Sir Guy Powles laid the basis for an institution which most certainly is in New Zealand to remain. The reports which often were written in his own hand were a model of their kind — articulate, comprehensible, always sensitively aware of feelings on both sides of each argument, and frequently touched with a good-humoured glance and some pleasant aspect of the correspondence which had been reaching him. In regard to complaints about a severe crop of accidents at a particular point on the highway he wrote:

The complainant sent me a sample of the original dangerous road surface to attach to the file as evidence in support of his complaint — his file thus became one of the weightiest that we have had in the office for a long time.

In the report which Sir George Laking made on leaving office as Chief Ombudsman in October 1984 there is reference to

... the critical importance of the approach adopted by the New Zealand Ombudsmen from the beginning in giving primary emphasis to the need to resolve differences by discussion and negotiation rather than to assign responsibility for administrative failure or to apportion blame.

And a little later it says “[t]he ability of the Ombudsman to avoid extravagant adulation and excessive criticism is a fair test of his competence. Either could destroy his effectiveness.” That kind of tolerant pragmatism and that capacity for detached self-appraisal which is not unbecoming in our New Zealand society is the true stamp and hall-mark of Sir Guy Powles. The conclusions arrived at by most people are influenced to some degree by intuition or what we like to call instinctive judgment. Most of us are supremely confident that we have huge resources of this infallible guide to success — until we are left looking the hard facts in the face. But it is fair to say I think that Dick Powles is one of the lucky ones. Somewhere deep down he has always been able to draw on the additional flash of intuition, of personal judgment, which has taken him with characteristic success through a whole succession of careers.

Just a few days ago on 5th November, The Dominion newspaper was concerned with the affair of Wendy Walters and the Secret Intelligence Service. In order to deal with the matter the reporter wisely reached back over the preceding ten years to Sir Guy’s landmark report on the Security Intelligence Service written in 1976 “The former Chief

SIR GUY POWLES

Ombudsman” said the Dominion, “cautioned the Security Intelligence Service about using State Servants in his 1976 investigation.” Having left his various offices he at least can feel satisfied that nobody will be left entirely free to go his own easy way, certainly not his successor the new president of the New Zealand Section of the International Commission of Jurists, when that kind of shot finds its target ten years down the track.

Earlier I spoke of Victoria University College at the end of the 1920s. And unless my information is all astray it is there that Dick Powles might be found casting the occasional hopeful but burning glance upon a lovely historian named Eileen Nicholls. They were married in 1931 — on the 20th January as I have learned tonight. It is a particular pleasure for all of us that Lady Powles is here at this dinner with her husband. Together they have added something very important not only to the lives of each other but for all of us. To use those lovely, engaging and delicate words of the Matrimonial Property Act this most certainly is a case where each has made precisely equal contributions to the marriage partnership.

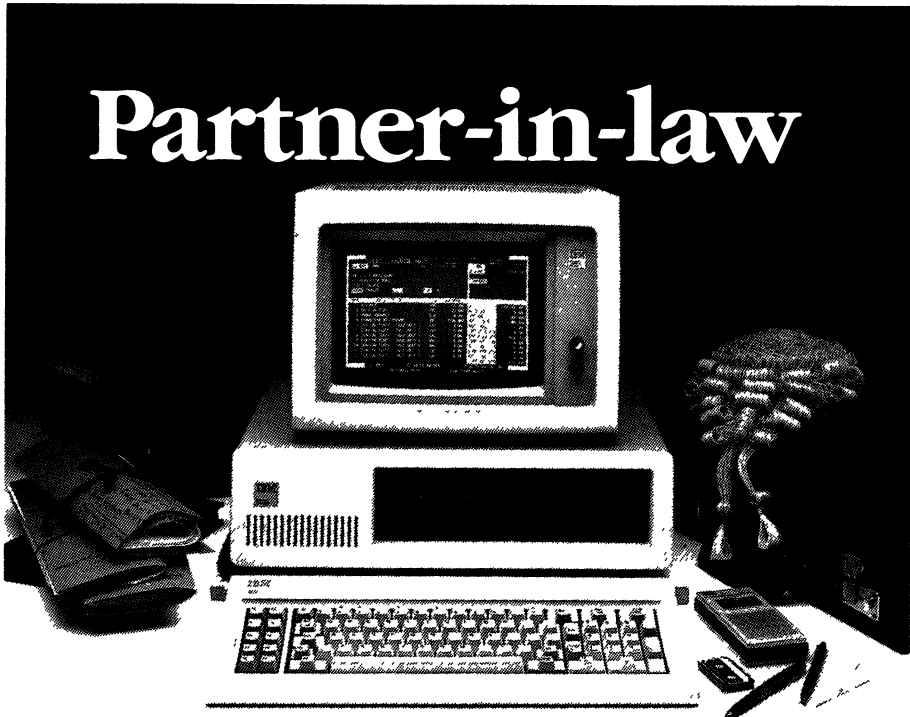
Finally, may I refer to a decision of Victoria University, Wellington to confer upon our honoured guest the honorary degree of Doctorate of Laws. It was announced in March 1969. Sir Guy and Lady Powles will have in their home the formal words of the University in conferring the degree.

I would like to end by mentioning a less formal statement made by the then Chancellor of the University when speaking to a reporter a few days before that event. Mr R. S. V. Simpson said:

[t]he University was delighted and honoured to be able to give its highest recognition to such New Zealanders.¹ The Ombudsman is among this University’s most distinguished students. He has a record that is enviable and exemplary. Principally that record is one of outstanding service as a human being regardless of achievement — that is the touchstone we feel in the award of honorary degrees.

And there may I leave him: lawyer, soldier, diplomat, founder Ombudsman and even beyond all these careers bearing so proud a record of service as a human being.

¹ He was referring as well to the then Chief Justice, Sir Richard Wild.



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